The cover features a stylized, high-contrast illustration of a man in profile, facing left, holding an open book. The man is depicted in white against a solid black background. The entire composition is framed by a decorative border composed of repeating geometric patterns, including squares, stars, and diagonal lines, rendered in white on a black background. The title is presented in a fragmented, torn-paper style across the right side of the cover.

INTRODUCTION

TO

BIBLE

READING

BERNARD G. THOROGOOD

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INTRODUCTION TO BIBLE READING



LOTU PASIFIKA PRODUCTIONS,
P.O. BOX 208, SUVA, FIJI.
PHONE : 24314, CABLE : LOTUPAK.
HEAD OFFICE : 8 THURSTON STREET, SUVA.

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Chapter 1

The Purpose of the Bible

When we take up our Bible to read the daily portion, we know that it is something holy. Why is it holy? It is only paper and ink like any other book; it has no magic when we touch it. Then if the book itself is not holy, perhaps it is the words that are holy. But how can words, sounds, letters, which are only things, be holy as the living God is holy? Then perhaps not the words themselves, but the whole meaning of the book makes it holy. This is surely closer to the truth. What is the message of the Bible as a whole? It is that God who created us cares for us eternally, and from the beginning of time has been seeking men to be His children. This purpose of God is seen most clearly in the Gospels, but it is in the whole Bible from Genesis to Revelation. When the Bible reveals to us the purpose and the nature of God, then it really becomes a holy book, for it is bringing the Holy God into our homes and our hearts.

But many parts of the Bible are hard to read and understand. Why is this? Why is it not all plain and straightforward? Because the Bible was written by a certain race of people who had their own language and customs, rather different from our own. They wrote, those old Jews, in words and ideas that their own people could understand. They did not think of explaining things for the people of the Pacific Islands. So we all need help in understanding the Bible. We want to know something of the history of the Jewish people and the kind of homes they lived in. So we study not only the words of the Bible itself, but also other books that can help us to understand the difficult passages.

But no other book can ever take the place of the Bible itself. God speaks to us through the Bible, so it becomes for us a living book. We say it is inspired. This means

that the men who wrote down the words of the Bible were men of faith who lived close to the mind of God. Of course they were men, and all men make mistakes sometimes. So we ought not to be surprised when we find an actual mistake in the Bible. (For example, see Mark 2,26, and compare it with the actual story in 1 Samuel 21,6. Mark was mixed up about the name of the priest. Or see Matthew 27,9. These words do not come directly from Jeremiah; they are more like Zechariah 11,13.) These are very small matters, but they show us that the writers were men like ourselves who could make mistakes. The spirit of God is in the whole message they give to us, rather than in each single word.

For this reason we would not say that the whole Bible is of equal value. There are some chapters in the Old Testament which seem to have little value for us today. We do not get a great deal of help from reading Leviticus with its mass of details of the Law, or from 1 Chronicles 1 to 9 with its lists of names. These things are not so important to us as the Gospels, which are the actual gateway to life for us all. But we have the Bible as a whole, and none of it can be thrown away. Even those passages which tell of unpleasant and evil things are part of the story, for they show us the truth about sin. In the early part of the Bible men thought of God in very simple ways. They thought that God lived in special places and that He belonged to one tribe of people rather than the whole world. The Bible shows us how men grew in understanding of God.

Here are some general suggestions to help you in Bible reading:—

1. Try to find out the background of the passage you are reading. This book will help you in this. It helps you to understand the words if you know the kind of writing it is and the purpose for which it was written.
2. When you are reading the Old Testament, compare what it says about God with what Jesus says about God. Jesus fulfils the Old Testament and reveals to us the full truth of God.

3. When you have read a passage, ask yourself, What does this mean for me today? God is speaking to us through the Bible, and His word to us should always lead us to action, to repentance or to thanksgiving, or to some Christian act of witness.
4. Join together your Bible reading and your prayer, Pray that you may understand the words you read, and pray after reading that the word of God may live in your heart and so reach other people.

Chapter 2

The Five Books of the Law

These come first in our Bible because they came first in the Jewish religion. They deal with the oldest stories of the Jews, and they tell us how the Jewish people was chosen by God and led by God to Canaan. The books have the name of Moses attached to them, but that does not mean that Moses wrote them all. Clearly Moses did not write the story of his own death at the end of Deuteronomy, and it is better to think of these books as being about Moses, rather than by him. Who actually did the writing? We do not know. But we do know that these books are made up of very different stories, so that probably several people joined in the writing of them.

We can see if we look at the first chapters of Genesis that the book is not one simple story. After chapter one tells us of the creation, the next chapter repeats the story in a different way. In the story of the flood there are two different sets of facts brought together. In Genesis 6, 19 Noah is commanded to take a single pair of each animal into the ark. In Genesis 7, 2 he is commanded to take seven pairs of clean beasts and one pair of unclean beasts. In Genesis 7, 12 the rain lasted forty days; in 7, 24 and 8, 3 it lasted 150 days. Right through the Law there are two names for God. In one lot of stories the name used is Jahweh (Jehovah), in another it is Elohim. So the simple way to explain this is to say that there were two or more stories which were brought together to make up the single book we now have.

This is very likely to have happened. These old stories were at first not written down at all, but handed on from father to son in the home by teaching. Probably they were not written down for 500 years after the events happened. So in that time many different people would

have different versions of the same thing. In much the same way, if you asked a Ngatangiia man about the story of Tangiia and then asked an Avarua man, he would tell you something a bit different. The same story is told in different ways by different people.

Because of these two names for God, the two writers are usually called J and E. We think that J came from the southern part of Canaan, or Judah, and that E came from the northern part, or Ephraim. But that does not seem to be the whole story. There are parts of the books of the law which do not seem to be by either of these two men. Some parts are very much concerned with the beginnings of the priesthood, with sacrifices and with the building of the tabernacle. We call the writer of those chapters P, or the Priestly writer.

GENESIS

This book has two main parts. Chapters 1 to 11 are about the beginnings of the world and man. Chapters 12 to 50 are about the Patriarchs of Israel. There are chapters in this book by the three writers, J, E, and P.

The first part of the book contains the wonderful stories in which the Jews told of the creation. Today many people think that the world was not created in the way which Genesis describes. People think that the creation was spread over many millions of years, and that men came into being through very slow changes from the animals. So they look at Genesis and say it is not true according to modern knowledge. But this is not the right way to look at Genesis. Its purpose is not to give us the facts of history, but to give us the facts of God. And the great fact is contained in the first verse of all, "In the beginning God created."

So men and women were created by God's act, and through His power. In Genesis the names of Adam and Eve do not mean just one man and one woman. Adam means mankind. Eve means life. So we can say that in the beginning God created not a dead world, but He gave life itself. And He made men and women to live in

perfect fellowship with Him and with the rest of the world—that is the meaning of the Garden of Eden. What spoils this perfect fellowship? In chapter 3 the answer comes that sin is what comes in between men and God, causing man to be proud of himself, and leading to the result that the perfect garden of the world becomes a scene of hard toil, and of distrust between men.

The story of the flood shows that God is concerned with the sin of man and that punishment follows sin. But there is more than punishment, there is hope. Out of the flood comes the rainbow as a sign of the everlasting blessing which God gives to all who trust in Him. The story of the tower at Babel shows that men in their pride try to reach heaven by their own cleverness. But because of their sin they cannot even understand one another. The fact of sin is the great dividing wall between men. So in chapters 1 to 11 we read great Christian truth about God and about our own nature.

In the second part of the book the most important person is Abraham, who was regarded as the father of the Jewish nation. We do not know anything about his character. We are told that God spoke to him, that he listened to God, and that he obeyed God. Those are the marks by which Abraham was remembered. In the New Testament he is remembered for these things. See Romans ch. 4, Galatians ch. 4, Hebrews ch. 11. God always needs an Abraham—a man who will listen and obey, and so the people of God are sometimes called the “children of Abraham”. Because the Jews rejected Christ, they ceased to be Abrahams, and this title was then given to the Church.

The stories about Jacob and Joseph do not pretend that these were perfect men; their faults are shown as well as their virtues. But again the important thing about them is the religious fact that God spoke to them, and worked through them in order to bring the people back into fellowship with Him. The time when these men lived was probably between 2000 and 1700 B.C.

EXODUS

This book's purpose is to describe God's salvation, by which the Israelites were delivered from Egypt, and so set free to follow the calling of God as His covenanted people. In Genesis we read how one family is chosen for a special purpose. In Exodus part of that purpose is fulfilled through the gift of the Law.

The time of the Exodus was about 1250 B.C., when the Pharaoh of Egypt was Rameses II, a man who oppressed the Jews because he feared their strength as a people. He ordered not only very hard labour, but also the killing of male children. But God had a purpose for these people, and did not allow them to be wiped out. Compare the efforts of Pharaoh to kill the Jewish children with Herod's efforts to wipe out the baby Jesus. In both cases God acts to save those whom He has chosen. In Exodus this salvation leads the people to Sinai, where the covenant is established and the will of God is made plain in the Law. It is clear that not all the laws which are described here were given at one time. Some of them deal with matters which only arose when Israel settled in Canaan. But the heart of the Law, which we call the Ten Commandments, is the foundation stone of the life of the covenant people, and we honour it today.

The sections of the book are:

- i The Exodus from Egypt. Ch. 1, 1 to 12, 36.
- ii. The Journey to Sinai. Ch. 12, 37 to 18, 27.
- iii. Establishment of the Covenant. Ch. 19 to ch. 24.
- iv. Building of the Tabernacle. Ch. 25 to ch. 40.

Moses is the great character of this book, and he was a man whose whole life was used by God. We should study his life as that of a servant of God who not only led people out of Egypt, but led them into a new understanding of God. Although His people often grumbled about his leadership and disobeyed, yet he never gave up his task, and never claimed any special power for himself. He was the great teacher of the faith. What was the faith of the

Jews at that time? There seem to have been three main features of it.

First, Israel must worship God alone. Every tribe at that time worshipped gods of different sorts, and made idols. Often they had very many gods. But Israel is to be different. There is to be only one kind of worship, that of God who is spirit, and therefore no pictures or idols of Him can be made. Wherever Israel goes, God is with them; He is not left behind.

Second, there was the Covenant. God had chosen the people of Israel out of all the people in the world, in order to do His work. At Sinai He made this covenant with them. He was to be their God, and they were to be His people. He would never desert them, and they were to be obedient to His will. Thus the promise of God to Abraham in Genesis 12 is confirmed and strengthened at Sinai.

Third, there is a certain kind of living that is demanded of God's people. They have to behave in the way we call righteous. Many of the heathen nations thought that their gods allowed them to live in sin, and that the gods themselves did things which we would call wicked. But the God who gave Moses the law is a righteous God, who calls His people to live righteously.

It is possible to understand some of the strange happenings in Exodus. For example, the river Nile does at certain times have a reddish colour like blood, and there are plagues of frogs and flies which come when the river floods its banks. We can also think of Sinai as a volcano, which does burst into flame and cloud. But however we explain these things, there remains the action of God. He acts in the flood and the fire and the parting of the Red Sea, whatever are the explanations of these things. It is because God acts to save, that Exodus is valuable to us all as truly Christian scripture.

LEVITICUS

This is a book that we find hard to use, because its laws are so very strange to us. It was intended to show

how the priests and the people should behave towards God; we can discover its value in the light of that purpose. All true worship must be filled with the knowledge of God's holiness, with the knowledge of our unworthiness and the knowledge that it is possible to come close to God. If we look at the laws of Jewish worship to find these things, then we shall see how close they are to our needs.

The book speaks a lot about the holiness of God; this idea runs right through it. What does it mean? It means the complete purity and the glory of God which sets Him apart from everything in the world. Because all men are mixed up with the sinfulness of the world, they can never find it easy to approach the holy God. We can only come to him with repentance. But in this sinful world things which are set aside for God's use may also be called holy, and we have to approach these things with reverence. So Leviticus contains laws about the priesthood and sacrifices, which are like a stepping stone between sinful men and the Holy God.

There are five main sections:

- i. Laws governing the sacrifices. Ch. 1 to 7.
- ii. The consecration of the Priesthood. Ch. 8 to 10.
- iii. Laws about things that are clean and unclean. Ch. 11 to 15.
- iv. The Day of Atonement. Ch. 16.
- v. The law of Holiness. Ch. 17 to 27.

It is thought that this last section is older than the rest, and was included in the book by the writer who probably lived in Canaan during the time of the kings. Certainly many of these laws are connected with the Canaanites, and so are later than the life of Moses.

When you read this book, think also of the message in the Epistle to the Hebrews. We do not need all these sacrifices of animals in our worship today because we have a high priest who sacrificed himself for us. He, Jesus Christ, is our way to God.

NUMBERS

This book continues with the story of the Jews from the point where the book of Exodus finishes, that is, at Sinai. Numbers describes how the people were counted (that is where the name "Numbers" comes from), and how they set out from Sinai towards the southern part of Canaan. But they were not strong enough to defeat the people of southern Canaan, and they had to retreat (Ch. 14). So they went back into the wilderness and spent many years wandering there. The actual distance that they travelled was not great. Today you could drive it in a car in a day or two. But they took about forty years. This was because they were travelling with their flocks and property. When they reached a place with water they settled there, perhaps for a year or two, until the water was finished and they had to move on. So they approached Canaan from the eastern side, and the book ends with them on the plain of Moab, not far from the River Jordan.

One of the interesting things in this book is its honesty about the character of the Jews. It would have been easy to write a story telling how brave they all were, how faithful to God they all were, just to make it appear that they were a tribe of heroes. But Numbers does not speak like that. It tells us often about the disobedience of the Jews, about their doubts of God, and about their rebellion against Moses. See chapters 11, 12, 14, 16, 20.

But in spite of their fears, they still had a great leader, and God never deserted them. This is perhaps the most important teaching of the book. In our lives there are times when we seem to be wandering in the desert. Perhaps our plans fail and we are without hope. Yet God's purpose will not fail, and He is with us during the hardest times. It was Jesus himself who went into the desert and spent forty days of testing and serious prayer before he entered his mission to the world. God is present in the deserts of life, and He can guide us to our Promised Land.

DEUTERONOMY

This name means "the second law". It is called this because the law which God gave to Moses at Sinai (Ex. 20) is here written down a second time (Ch. 5). It is much more than a repeat of Exodus, for in Ch. 6 we have the summary of the law (verses 4 and 5), which Jesus teaches us is the heart of all the religion of the Old Testament. If the Jews had been able to keep this one law, then all the many others would have been only secondary. It is the same with us. This one great law should control all our behaviour and all our worship.

But why should there be a second law at all? How does it come into the Bible? Look at 2 Kings, chapters 22 and 23. There we read how during the reign of King Josiah some workmen were repairing a wall of the temple when they found among the stones a very old book. This book was taken to the king and read out to him. He was so moved in his heart by what was read that he at once set about reforming the Jewish religion. Many ways of worship had grown up which were not faithful to God, and no king had worried much about them. But Josiah cleansed Jewish worship as a result of listening to this book. We believe that the book he read was Deuteronomy. When it was found in 621 B.C. it was already an old book, and we cannot tell when it was written. But just as there are two accounts of creation in Genesis, so Exodus and Deuteronomy give two accounts of the law.

The form of the book is a series of long speeches or sermons by Moses, spoken at the end of his life to the people of Israel as they camped on the plain of Moab. In the first sermon (Ch. 1, 1 to 4, 40) Moses reminds the people of the way they have been led from the holy mountain. Here the name of the mountain is given as Horeb, but it was probably the same place as Sinai; two names for the same place. In the second sermon (Ch. 5 to Ch. 28) Moses reminds the people of the Commandments of God, and explains some of the ways in which they must be kept. He explains how men should look

after the things which God has given to them, and how to deal with those who upset society. In the third sermon (Ch. 29 and 30) Moses looks towards the future of the people as they enter Canaan, calling on them to remain faithful to the Lord. Chapters 31 to 34 deal with the last days of Moses, and include a great song of praise (32), and the blessing of the tribes (33).

Jesus said that he came to fulfil the law, not to destroy it. See how true this is. The whole purpose of the law was to show men that to love God is the one great aim in life, and that this must be worked out not only in our worship, but also in our dealings with one another. The whole life of Jesus reveals this perfect love of God in action. He was at every point obedient to the will of God. He was holy as God is holy. The old covenant of law was transformed into the new covenant of grace in Christ, but the God who gave the law is the God who came in Christ. The God of Moses is the God of Jesus, and our God.

Chapter 3

The Books of Jewish History

History is the story of how things happened in the past, and there is a great deal of this in the Old Testament. Today when we write history our first concern is that it should be completely accurate. We want to know exactly when a king was born, when he came to the throne, what his policy was, why he fought wars with other nations, and so on. All that would be part of a modern history book. But for the Jews history was rather different. Their first concern was not with dates or with names of people but with God. They wanted to write down what God had done with His people in the past, and how they had answered God's calling. To the writers of the Old Testament, a small mistake in the age of a man would not matter so long as they gave a true picture of God's will. In all the reigns of the judges and the kings it is the religious side of life that is most important. For these books were written to teach people how the nation should live, through looking at the past.

JOSHUA

This book tells the story of the conquest of Canaan by the Jews under Joshua as their leader (Ch. 1-12) and the division of the land among the twelve tribes (13-22). It ends with two sermons by Joshua (23-24), in which he calls on the people to stand fast in their faith, and not to drift away to other kinds of worship. Like the books of the law, this book has been built up of several different stories, and was put together much later than the actual time of Joshua. The most likely date for the conquest of Canaan is 1250 to 1200 B.C.

When the Jews entered Canaan they fought as tribes rather than as a single army, and it was not long before

each tribe settled on its own section of land. For a time Joshua was able to lead them all, but as they settled down in different places each tribe followed its own elders. So it is unlikely that the conquest of the land was a quick fight under one leader. Probably the story in Judges of a slow struggle under many different leaders is more correct. But Joshua was remembered as a very brave leader who followed the purpose of Moses. He did not conquer all the land. The strong city of Jerusalem, for example, did not fall until the time of David. But enough land was captured for the Jews to live on for a time. And to them, after the long years in the desert, it seemed indeed a Promised Land, where there was water and grass and soil for planting.

But although the land was good for them, many new problems arose. They were living among a heathen people, for the Canaanites still lived in the area, and the temptation always was for the Jews to follow the Canaanite ways of life and worship. For the next five hundred years this temptation affected their lives, and we can read of it in Judges, Samuel and Kings.

There is one question about the book of Joshua that disturbs us today. The Jews are shown to have done many cruel things in battle. They slaughtered hundreds of people, they destroyed whole towns and threw out the native people. Was this a good thing to do? Did God really approve of this? How does this link up with our knowledge of God who is love? First we must remember that the Jews at that time had only a simple knowledge of God, and to them He fought for them in their battles. If they had to fight, then God would surely fight. We may not think of God in this way, but this was their faith. Second, there was perhaps no other way in which the Jews could find a land of their own, except by fighting. They needed a place where they were free. It was a time when fighting was the common thing. It was only later in the time of the prophets that men came to see that peace, not war, is the will of God. But even in the rough lives of those early times God was working to build up His chosen people.

JUDGES

After the death of Joshua it is likely that the Jews slipped backwards in their religious faith. Many of them began to worship the baals of the Canaanites, and marriages occurred between the two races. But there were leaders who helped the people to stand firm, and they are called judges. The name does not mean anything to do with the law court as it does today. It means a leader of a tribe who resisted the enemies of his people, and tried to make them faithful to the law of God. The period of the judges was about 1200 to 1000 B.C.

There are three sections of the book:—

- i. 1, 1 to 2, 5. This gives a short story of the conquest of Canaan.
- ii. 2, 6 to 16, 31. Stories of the judges.
- iii. 17 to 21. Two long stories about the tribe of Dan and the tribe of Benjamin, probably very old stories added to the main section at a later date.

Section i. shows that after the death of Joshua there were still many Canaanites living in Palestine, and that the tribes acted individually to capture their own areas. The Jews had much to learn from the Canaanites. When they arrived in the land they knew nothing about the work of planting corn or vines or olives; they knew nothing of the way to manufacture things out of metal; they had not lived in towns. So there were useful things to be learnt. But they had to be careful not to accept the dangerous things at the same time.

Twelve judges are named in the book. Six are only just mentioned: Shamgar (3, 31), Tola (10, 1), Jair (10, 3), Ibzan (12, 8), Elon (12, 11), and Abdon (12, 13). The other six are written about more fully; Othniel and Ehud, Deborah, Gideon, Jephthah and Samson. In each case it is shown how faithfulness to God gives strength to His people, and disobedience causes weakness. This is true to the history. Only when the Jews were struggling for

the right were they able to resist their pagan enemies. When they accepted evil ways then they were easily conquered. The story of Gideon's army in chapter 7 shows that a few men who are really faithful to God are stronger than many faithless ones. The story of Samson is also a parable for us. When we break our promises to God, then we can no longer resist those who are God's enemies. In our lives it is true faith which gives us strength to fight and conquer temptation.

FIRST AND SECOND SAMUEL

These books start with the birth and childhood of Samuel, about 1025 B.C., and finish with the end of David's reign, about 970 B.C. The purpose of the books is to tell of the first anointed kings to rule over the Jews, and to show how these kings fitted into the plan of God. We can see that the writer brought together many old stories into the one book. Look at chapter 16 of 1 Samuel. It tells how the young David was brought into the presence of Saul because he was so good at music. Saul loves him and keeps him as his armour bearer, sending a message to his father Jesse. But in chapter 17 the young David is not beside Saul in the battle. He is still at home with his father. He goes to his brothers, fights and kills Goliath and then meets Saul. Saul does not know him, and asks who his father is (verse 55). So here are two stories about the young David brought together by the writer of the book.

We can note the following sections:—

- i. Stories about the childhood of Samuel. 1 Sam. ch. 1-3.
- ii. Stories about the capture of the ark and bringing it to Jerusalem. 1 Sam. ch. 4-7.
- iii. Stories about the choosing of Saul as the first king, about his reign, about his son Jonathan and the young David. 1 Sam. ch. 8-31.
- iv. Stories about the reign of David. 2 Samuel.

It is important to see in these books just what the Jewish idea of a king was. The prophet Samuel at first

objected to the request of the Jews to have a king. They wanted a man who would unite them in battle against their enemies. They wanted to be like other nations. But Samuel warns them that the Jews are not like other nations. They are the chosen people of God, and He rules over them. So a king for the Jews can never be quite the same as the kings of the heathen people. The idea therefore became established that the king was ruling the people on behalf of God. He could not do anything he wanted to do. He was not all-powerful. If he did something that was against the will of God then he had to repent of his sin. So the prophets were important people during the reigns of all the kings. They were the men who lived close to the spirit of God and who could proclaim His word to the whole nation, including its king. We notice how David did listen to Nathan and repent of his sin.

David is the most interesting character in the book. Not very much is told to us about Saul as a man. He was a great soldier and helped to build up the strength of the people. But David is shown to us as a man of great ability and faith. He loved his people and tried to serve them. He remembered his God and the worship of His house. He prepared the way for the building of the temple. At times he could commit great sins (see 2 Samuel, chapters 11 and 21), but he was honestly repentant and turned to God with shame in his heart. It is because David knew the power of faith that he was afterwards remembered as the greatest of the kings, to be followed long afterwards by one of the line of David who would be anointed not with oil but by the Holy Spirit.

FIRST AND SECOND KINGS

This book follows directly on from the end of 2 Samuel. It tells the history of the Jews from the reign of Solomon and the death of David right up to the fall of Jerusalem and the exile to Babylon in 586 B.C.

Chapters 1 to 11 deal with the reign of Solomon. He is usually remembered as a very wise man. But it is hard to

see any truth in this. We are told that he prayed to God for wisdom, and that he was very clever in his decision in a court case between two women (ch. 3). But apart from that, the other stories of him show him to be a foolish man rather than a wise one. He built up the power of his court. He built the very big temple in Jerusalem. He added to the wealth of the rich people in Jerusalem. Later on people remembered the building of the temple as a great thing which he had done. Yet his heart was not in his faith. He did not know the meaning of repentance as David did. Because he wanted to keep on building great palaces, he compelled people to work for him like slaves, and he taxed the people very heavily. He welcomed foreign people into his palace with all their heathen ways of worship, so that the very faith of the people was betrayed. These are not the acts of a wise man. This should teach us that we cannot have wisdom unless we continually listen to God. It is no use just asking for wisdom and then forgetting all about God.

With the end of Solomon's reign comes the division of the kingdom. From that time (933 B.C.) until the exile there were two kingdoms each with its own king. The son of Solomon was Rehoboam. He thought that he would be accepted as king, and he spoke very hard words to the people, trying to show them how strong he was. But Jeroboam, who had once opposed Solomon and had to run away to Egypt, now returned and started a rebellion against Rehoboam. Most of the people were glad of the chance to escape the hard work and taxes that Rehoboam tried to force upon them, so Jeroboam was able to become their leader. He set up his headquarters in Shechem. From that time onwards we speak of the northern kingdom as Israel and the southern kingdom as Judah. The capital of the southern kingdom remained at Jerusalem, and that was its great strength when enemies came.

In the books of Kings the stories of these two kingdoms are told side by side up to 2 Kings 17, when the northern kingdom was completely destroyed by the Assyrians in 721 B.C. Judah remained free until the Babylonians grew

powerful and succeeded in capturing Jerusalem. It is important to remember that these nations of Israel and Judah were very small, and they were surrounded by much bigger countries. So their history depends upon the power of their neighbours. At different times they faced the nations who surrounded them. In the time of the Judges the struggle was with the Philistines to the west, on the sea coast. Then the Syrians and the Assyrians to the north were the chief danger; later the Babylonians from the east grew powerful. Much later the Greeks and then the Romans sent their soldiers across the little land of Canaan, so the Jews always lived in the shadow of danger. The books of Kings tell us how the prophets encouraged the people not to lose their faith in God even when these great powerful enemies were at hand. Unfortunately, many of the kings failed, and put their trust in friendship with some heathen nation. They discovered that if you cannot trust God, then it is no use to trust in Egypt or Syria.

CHRONICLES, EZRA AND NEHEMIAH

Although these are now divided into four books in our Bible, they were all written at about the same time, and probably by the same people. When were they written? From the list of names in 1 Chron. ch. 3 we find there are five generations after Zerubbabel. We know from Nehemiah ch. 7 that Zerubbabel was living at about 530 B.C. So the book cannot have been written down before about 350 B.C. That is, there is a long gap between the actual events and the writing of them. There were probably many small records of the events, and these were gathered together later on to make a large book.

The purpose of these books is to trace very carefully the people whom God had chosen, their families and their difficulties, so that everyone would know just who they were. There are many chapters which are just lists of names. To us they seem very dull. But at the time they were thought to be important, because if God had really chosen the Jews to be His servants, then this showed just

who the real faithful Jews were. In Chronicles there is no history of the northern kingdom of Israel; only of the southern kingdom of Judah. This is because the writer thought the northern people had lost their right to be part of God's people. They were not faithful. It was out of Judah that hope came for the future. Therefore Chronicles traces the line of kings from David through to the captivity in Babylon, and ends with the coming of king Cyrus of Persia to Babylon. That was the time when the first of the exiles were allowed to return home. What happened to them is then explained in Ezra and Nehemiah.

When the exiles returned, it was not only buildings that had to be restored. The whole life of the people had to be built up again. So it is made clear that the temple and the law of God were essential to the new city of Jerusalem. Ezra and Nehemiah had lived in captivity, and they knew how hard it would be for the full religious life of the Jews to be restored. Not only had the people become used to foreign ways, but the land of Palestine itself was occupied by many foreigners who would try to interrupt the work of rebuilding. Ezra probably returned to Jerusalem about 458 B.C., and his first task was to restore the Jewish families that had become mixed with foreign people (Ezra ch. 9 and 10) so that the Jews could again keep entirely to one faith. Then he read out the law of God and the people renewed their covenant (Nehemiah ch. 9). Nehemiah supported and continued the work of Ezra, and was a man who could plan buildings and who raised up the walls of the city. It was due to these men that the Jews kept not only their city but also their faith.

Chapter 4

The Prophets and Their Message

From their earliest days the Jewish people had believed that God speaks to His people. Usually this happened through one of their leaders who was righteous and who prayed to God. Certainly Moses is the first of the whole long line of prophets, because through him God clearly spoke to the children of Israel. But in those early years prophecy was mixed up with many kinds of magic. Men looked for signs and miracles, they paid money to discover the future, and even tried to receive messages from dead people. But through all these unworthy things the true line of prophecy continued. Through Samuel to Elijah and Elisha and so on to the men whose work is recorded in the prophetic books. After them we can still see the same work of prophecy in John the Baptist and so to Jesus. What is the central purpose of their work? It is to declare the will of God to the people of God, that they might truly serve Him. Sometimes they declared what was going to happen in the future, but their chief concern was not to reveal the future. They were concerned first of all with their own days, and they so listened to the spirit of God in their hearts that they were able to say quite boldly how God would bless the faithful and punish the unfaithful.

Probably few of the prophets wrote down their own words. Usually it was their followers who remembered what they had said and collected together all their memories to make a book. So as we read the prophets, we often find passages that do not seem to be connected with what went before or what goes after. Most of the books are collections of short pieces.

Most of the books say "The Word of the Lord came to . . ." Does this mean that God spoke to them in

ordinary human language? We do not know. It seems likely that God spoke to them as He speaks to us, by the thoughts which He puts into our hearts. We know that they were indeed the thoughts of God because they point so faithfully towards Jesus Christ. There are many passages in the books which are called Messianic; that is, they are clearly fulfilled in the person of Jesus. Of course the prophets did not know all about Jesus. They were looking forward to a deliverer who would free the people from their sorrow and their sin. Because they lived so close to God, what they said about this deliverer often was revealed as true to Jesus.

ISAIAH.

Because this long book seems to belong to three different ages in the life of the Jews, we usually think of it in three parts:—

i. Chapters 1 to 39. This is the part that is clearly about the prophet Isaiah himself. His name is often mentioned, and we have the wonderful story of the way God called him to be a prophet. (Ch. 6.) From the time of the King Uzziah, who had just died, we know that he received his call in 740 B.C. His work lasted through the years to the time when the Assyrians were attacking his country in 700 B.C. At the start of his work Judah seemed to be a wealthy country, and there were rich people who did their best to oppress the poor and to turn them off their land. (Ch. 3 and 5.) So he describes the people as a vineyard that God has planted and cared for but which brings as its harvest not good fruit but rotten bitter fruit. (Ch. 5, 1-7.) There will surely be a punishment for such a people.

Isaiah was living at a difficult time for the people of Judah, because of the strong Assyrian nation that was spreading from the north. At times the Jews thought they would be safe if they made friends with Egypt, but Isaiah resists such a policy, pointing out to them that Egypt is nothing but flesh, her people are men and not God. Isaiah was able to preach his message to the King of Judah,

Hezekiah, who listened and obeyed the word. He put his trust in God alone. The salvation that resulted put an end to the attacks of the Assyrians.

Isaiah knew that many of the Jews had lost their faith and could not take their place among the saints of God. But in spite of the severe punishment which he saw was coming, he was always hopeful, because a remnant would be faithful. This idea of the faithful remnant became important in the religion of the Jews, and we can see that it is true to the facts. Throughout the exile and the return, through the Greek and Roman occupation, the true faith in God was not kept by a majority, but by the few.

ii. Chapters 40 to 55. This section is usually called Second Isaiah. When it was written Jerusalem was in ruins (44, 26-28), and the people were captives. But the writer saw deliverance coming. Babylon will be overthrown (47, 1-5), and the exiles will go free (48, 20; 51, 11; 52, 11). The man who will make this freedom possible is Cyrus (44, 28; 45, 1). So clearly this was written towards the end of the captivity in Babylon, between 550 and 450 B.C., some 200 years after the actual life of Isaiah. So this section was written by a man whose name we do not know, and was put together with Isaiah's book.

The writer of these chapters sees the salvation of God coming to his people. His message is one of comfort. He knew the sorrows and sufferings of his people which had come as a result of their sins, but he also knew that God had not finished His purpose with them. There are four important passages about the Servant of God. They are 42, 1-4; 49, 1-6; 50, 4-9 and 52, 13-53, 12. These are sometimes called the Servant songs. In these the writer tells of the mission of God's servant to bring light to all the gentile nations, and in the last of these passages he declares that the salvation will come through the sufferings of the servant. This is one of the most wonderful prophecies in the Bible. When we read it we always think of the cross of Christ, because there he was bruised for our sin, and with his wounds there we are healed. The writer may have been thinking of a man who would come

to be God's servant, but often he writes in the past tense, as though the servant had already lived. So some people think he meant the faithful Jews as God's servant, for they did suffer in exile. But we cannot be sure who was in his mind when he wrote. What is most important is that he saw his way towards the cross as the way of salvation.

iii. Chapters 56 to 66. This section is usually called Third Isaiah. It seems to have been written in Palestine when the Jews returned from Babylon. The temple has been rebuilt (56, 5-7; 60, 7), although the walls are not yet finished (60, 10). So it seems to have been written about the time of Nehemiah, around 420 B.C. We can see in these chapters a strong desire for the glory of Israel. In Second Isaiah Israel is to serve the gentiles, but here the gentiles are to bow down and serve her. The keeping of the Sabbath and the services of the temple are shown to be very important. This section is not on quite the same level of spiritual understanding as the previous one.

JEREMIAH

This is a simpler book than Isaiah, being all connected with the one man. Jeremiah lived and worked during the forty years before the city of Jerusalem was destroyed by the army of Babylon. He was called by God as a young man during the reign of Josiah. When the king started to reform the Jewish religion (see the section about Deuteronomy), Jeremiah at first thought that this would be the way to salvation for the people. But he was disappointed. People were far more interested in the careful observance of the laws than they were in offering their lives to God as a living sacrifice. So Jeremiah preached in the temple about the punishment that would come, and the people were so angry that he was almost killed. At this time the power of Babylon was getting dangerous, and Jeremiah saw the approach of the enemy as the punishment of God. As he continued to preach, he was arrested and put in prison. The king thought of him as a traitor to his own people, and was not convinced by his words. When Jerusalem did fall to the enemy, Jeremiah was left behind as a person of no value.

There are four main sections of the book:—

- i. 1-25. A collection of prophecies together with some personal stories, including his calling by God.
- ii. 26-45. Mainly the personal events of Jeremiah's life.
- iii. 46-51. Prophecies about the foreign nations around them.
- iv. 52. This is repeated from 2 Kings 24 and 25, giving the facts of the fall of Jerusalem.

Jeremiah was a man of great courage. He was often lonely, being persecuted by his own family (11, 21-23). Sometimes he felt that it was useless to go on preaching because the people refused to believe (20, 7), but the fire of God's word burned in his heart and he could not keep silent (20, 9). In chapter 31 there is a passage about the new covenant. Here Jeremiah looks forward to the great blessing when every man will know God in his own heart and so will be able to keep the laws. This is a prophecy which came true in Jesus, for the new covenant in the blood of Christ does bring us to a knowledge of God.

EZEKIEL

This prophet started his work at the point where Jeremiah finished his task. Ezekiel was taken away to Babylon in 586 B.C., and soon began his work in a small house beside one of the canals of Babylon. So he spoke to a defeated people. We can guess that many of the people were downhearted. Some thought that this defeat was the end of God's plan for them. Others were bitter and said that they were suffering not for their own sins, but for the sins of their fathers. So the work of Ezekiel was to reveal how God still called the Jews to be His people, how they could remain faithful and rebuild their national life, how every man has to bear the burden of his own life and cannot shift blame on to others. (Ch. 18.) Ezekiel saw himself as a watchman (ch. 33) over the people of Israel,

and he knew it was his duty to warn them when they were in danger.

There are several chapters in the book which are visions. What does this mean? It is one way in which God put His truth into the prophet's heart. The spirit of God revealed a picture or a parable. This may sometimes have been like a dream in the mind of the prophet. It may have come to him when he was thinking deeply about the work of God, so that he could see in his mind something that showed God in action. In chapter 1 there is a vision of the holy God himself. The meaning here is that God is like a bright light which shines in every direction, which reaches as far as Babylon. God's glory is not only in the temple at Jerusalem, for the chariot has wheels that go in every direction. Ezekiel reveals through this vision that although the Jews have travelled far from home, yet God's glory has not been left behind. In chapter 37 is the vision of the dry bones which came alive. Ezekiel saw in his mind that the Jews in Babylon were not a living people, and that they could only become really alive if the spirit of God blew into their hearts. The spirit is like the wind, and the dead useless people become like a great army. Compare this chapter with the story of Pentecost in Acts. Then from chapter 40 onwards there is a vision of the temple at Jerusalem. Ezekiel saw in his mind how this great centre of worship should be rebuilt and become once again the source of spiritual life for the people. Although some of this does not help us very much, look at chapter 47. Here is the purpose of the temple, the purpose of our churches today, to be the place from which comes the water of life, like a great river.

The last verse of the book has the important message, "The name of the city shall be, The Lord is there." This is what inspired the exiles through the hard years, and sent them back home at last to rebuild. The new city was to be a place where the Lord would be faithfully worshipped. Compare this with the vision of the New Jerusalem in Revelation. Can we give this name to our village and our island?

HOSEA

This prophet lived at about the same time as Isaiah. He seems to have finished his work before the northern kingdom fell to the Assyrians in 721 B.C. He belonged to the northern kingdom and worked there. He looks to the kind of life the people were living, careless of God, mixed up with all kinds of heathen customs. He sees that there is sure to be suffering as the result of this. But his most important message to the people is not about their sins but about God's love.

In chapters 1 to 3 we find the story of the woman Gomer. Although the writing is confused, we see that Hosea married Gomer and truly loved her. Yet she was a bad woman who was unfaithful to her husband, and when some children had been born, she left Hosea to go back to her sinful ways. Hosea did not stop loving her. He went to find her, and after a period of waiting he took her back again as his wife. This story is told as a parable of the love that God has for His people. Often they run away to a sinful life, obeying other gods, but God does not stop loving them. He is like the husband of Israel who will seek her and bring her back to his home. The message is summarised in ch. 2, 23. God will have pity on the one who is not pitied; He will say to those who do not think they are His people, "Indeed you are my people." And at the end they will be able to say, "Yes, Thou art indeed our God."

JOEL

This little book was probably written after the exile. Ch. 3, 6 mentions the Greeks. They were not powerful until the fourth century B.C. The book is important for two ideas in it. The prophet speaks of the Day of the Lord (2, 1) which is to be a day of judgement upon those who are faithless. Many Jews had this idea that a day was coming when everything that was hidden would be revealed by God, and His glory would be made plain to the

whole earth. This idea continues through the New Testament, where we read of the day when the Lord will come in glory. The second great thought in Joel is in ch. 2, 28-29, where he speaks of the pouring out of God's spirit. This gift will not be just to the Jews, but to "all flesh", and it will be a gift of power. This indeed came true at Pentecost, and has been continued wherever men have come to a deep knowledge of God.

AMOS

Amos was probably the first of the great prophets of the 8th century B.C. He was born in the south, probably about 780 B.C., but his work was in the north in the kingdom of Israel. This people had always been in danger of falling into paganism. Elijah had struggled hard to prevent this, but again and again the people fell into the worship of the idols of the heathen around them. Amos did not have an easy entry into his work. He was not a priest or from a powerful family, but had been a simple farmer. So when he preached it was only by the power of his message that he could get a hearing. The priests did not like him because he seemed to be upsetting their work (ch. 7), and they ordered him not to preach at Bethel, which was the holy place for the northern kingdom.

Amos certainly had a powerful message to preach. His book starts with a strong condemnation of the heathen nations, Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom and so on. (Ch. 1, 3 to 2, 3.) Then suddenly he turns on his own people, Judah and Israel, and speaks to them in the same way. Indeed, the condemnation of Israel is even stronger than on the heathen, because God had done so much for them. (Ch. 3, 2.) They had been given the great privilege of being called and led by God, and yet they had fallen away. So the judgement on them is all the harder. The day of the Lord which so many people thought would bring joy, would only bring judgement for such sinful people (5, 18).

The sins that Amos speaks most about are of two sorts. He sees the life of wealth and comfort of a section of the people. (6, 1-7.) Such people care nothing for God, but only for their own enjoyment. They are cruel to the poor. (8, 4-6.) They do not understand the meaning of justice, and they cheat the poor who come to buy wheat, in order to make more money for themselves. The second sin of the people is the way they have allowed their religion to become rotten. Instead of thinking about righteousness, they only think about the big ceremonies. (5, 21-24.) God, says Amos, cares nothing for the smell of all the sacrifices; He wants justice "to roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream." This message is needed by every church, for we too can fall away as Israel did.

OBADIAH

This little book of only 24 verses was written after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. (v. 11.) The prophet has a message to give about the people of Edom, who lived to the south of the Dead Sea. There had always been bad feeling between these Edomites and the Jews. David had captured it, but the people rebelled (2 Kings 8, 20). When Jerusalem was destroyed, the Edomites did nothing to help the Jews, but waited until they were defeated, and then tried to find something valuable in the ruins. The message of the prophet is that Edom may be victorious for the moment, but will certainly have no abiding strength. When the prophet was writing, there were already those who prepared to attack her. (v. 1.) So this book does not bring a message of spiritual help, but of political revenge. It shows us how far men can get from God if they think only of the success of their country.

JONAH

This is quite different from all the books of the prophets, since it is nearly all a story, with one psalm

or hymn in it (2, 2-9). Instead of the book being the sermons of a man to the people around him, we have just the story he told, with no mention of the man who told it. There may have been some actual happening which was the basis of the story, but we cannot be sure of that. There are some things in the book which make us think it is not historical. For example, the size of the city of Nineveh is much bigger than the ruins of it which have been found, and we cannot see how such a number of people could be converted by one day's preaching. The story of the whale also seems more like a legend than like history. But this does not alter the great value of the book.

Its value is that it teaches a lesson. After the Jews returned to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon, they became very proud of their race. The Jews, they thought, were alone the people that God had chosen. He had given them His message, and they were to defend it against all enemies. They did not think highly of any other nation, but rather despised them all. It is in that situation that the story of Jonah was told, to remind the Jews that God has a purpose for the whole world, and that the Chosen People were chosen for a mission to the world. That is the purpose for which the book was written then, and it is still its purpose when we read it today.

Jonah stands for the Jews. He is called to serve God in a distant place, but tries to run away from this calling. He sets out in the opposite direction to Tarshish (possibly on the coast of Spain). But God has not finished with him, and through the storm he brings Jonah to safety and eventually to Nineveh. There he preaches, and the people listen and are converted. So God spares the city. At this Jonah is angry. He would like the people to be destroyed, and God has to teach him that He loves the city and all its people. So the Jews have to proclaim their faith because God cares for all the heathen nations just as much as He cares for the Jews. The Jews were called to be servants of God. This teaching is still needed in our churches today.

MICAH

At about the same time as Isaiah was working in Jerusalem, the prophet Micah was living at a place called Maresha near Gath, in the southern kingdom. Although his message was a condemnation of the sins of the people, there are three passages of great hope and Christian importance. In Ch. 5, 2-4 he speaks of the deliverer who is to come. Because he lived in Judah he looked towards Bethlehem, the family home of the kings, as the place where the deliverer will be born. Many years later King Herod was to remember this when the wise men came looking for the new-born king. Then in Ch. 6, 6-8 there is a wonderful statement of what true religion really is. How can a man please God? Can we please Him by the number of the sacrifices we bring? Micah knows that we cannot. What God desires is men who will act justly, who will love kindness, and who will walk daily in humility. This is just as true today as when Micah spoke the words. Then at the end of the book, in Ch. 7, 18-20, he describes the nature of God Himself. His nature is to love and forgive. In spite of all sins. He will show His eternal faithfulness to His people. This is not only a Jewish hope, but a Christian certainty. For God has revealed this love and forgiveness in Jesus.

NAHUM

This prophet was writing about the judgement of God upon Nineveh, the capital city of Assyria. For generations this nation had been a great power in war, and had conquered all the smaller nations around it. In 721 B.C. the kingdom of Israel had fallen to its armies, and Judah had only just escaped. Then the power of the Babylonians began to grow, and in 620 B.C. their armies marched upon Nineveh. It was at this time that the prophet saw the judgement of God coming to the proud heathen city. We ought to notice that although Nineveh was destroyed, this did not help the people of Judah, for shortly after-

wards Babylon sent her armies against Canaan and Judah was destroyed. So although the prophet was right in seeing that the proud heathen conqueror will be under God's sure judgement, we must also remember that God judges not only our enemies, but also ourselves.

HABAKKUK

At about the same time as Jeremiah, this prophecy was written as a warning to the people of Judah that the Babylonians would come and defeat them. No true believer in God could be happy with such a message. Does God approve of death and destruction as a way of judgement? In this book the prophet seeks for an answer to these questions. In chapter 2 God speaks to him. The vision is not clear (v. 3), for there is much that men cannot understand. But what is clear is that "the righteous man shall live by his faith" (v. 4). This phrase has come to mean a great deal for Christian people. Salvation by faith alone was one of the strong messages of the Reformation, and this verse was used to support it. At the time when it was written, however, it did not refer to faith in Jesus, but rather that even in death and oppression, even in exile, the righteous man will find a life of faith through faith. Chapter 3 is a psalm, and may be by a different author.

ZEPHANIAH

In the first verse of this book the family of the prophet is set out. The Hezekiah mentioned may have been the king who lived about 100 years before the prophet. Zephaniah was working in Jerusalem during the reign of Josiah, probably between 630 and 620 B.C. His book is a vision of judgement, which he calls the day of the Lord. Although many Jews were at that time still hopeful, thinking that Judah would be safe from her enemies, yet the prophet sees hard judgement coming to her for her sins. He thinks that the day of the Lord is near. Perhaps he was thinking of the strength of the Babylonians, who

were the human means through which judgement did come. Yet in the day of judgement the prophet sees hope for those few who are faithful (ch. 3, 12-13). The humble and lowly, the lame and the outcasts will be raised up by God and will find God's blessing upon them. (3, 19-20.)

HAGGAI

A definite date is given to this book. The second year of Darius was 520 B.C., and at that time some of the Jews had returned from Babylon to Jerusalem. The purpose was to rebuild the temple, but things had not gone well. There were many foreigners in Judea who tried to stop the work (see the book of Nehemiah), and the Jews were poor. So although they had been back in Jerusalem for nearly twenty years, they had not started on rebuilding the temple. Haggai preaches to the people and to Zerubabel, the governor of the city, not to neglect the temple any longer. There will be no true prosperity in Jerusalem until the work is started.

ZECHARIAH

This book is in two parts. Chapters 1 to 8 are about the work of the prophet Zechariah. Chapters 9 to 14 are much later, perhaps written during the 3rd century B.C., and containing visions rather like Daniel and Revelation. The prophet Zechariah lived at the same time as Haggai in Jerusalem after the return from exile. He gives his message in a series of eight visions, which are difficult to interpret. But if we take them together, then the picture is of the restored Jerusalem, where God's power rules over men and the enemies of God are defeated. In ch. 4 the two live trees that supply the oil for the lamp may stand for the governor and the high priests, those who should give strength to the work of God. In the second part of the book the writer, whose name we do not know, sees the coming of the Messiah (ch. 9) who will do God's work, and the great day when the Lord will become king over all the earth. (14, 9.)

MALACHI

The name just means "My messenger", and may not be the name of a man at all. Writing after the return from exile, the prophet sees how poor is the worship of God's temple. People do not bother to give the right offerings (3, 8), and even those things they do offer are often rotten instead of being perfect (1, 7-8). So the people did not honour God in worship and ignored God's commands (3, 13-15). The prophet sees that God will again speak to His people through a messenger, to save them from their sin (3, 1-4), and in the last verse of the book he suggests that this messenger will be Elijah coming to earth again. This may be the reason why people at the time of Jesus thought that he might be Elijah. This book should make us all ask whether our worship of God is holy and acceptable. Do we offer to God the best that we have?

Chapter 5

The Writings

This is the last section of the Old Testament, and includes various books, hymns, stories, poems from the days of David right up to about 200 B.C. When the Jews were putting their holy books together to form their Scriptures, these books were put at the end, and they were doubtful if all of them should be included. Many of these books were written as poetry, and we should read them as poetry. What does this mean? In a poem the writer uses words to make pictures rather than to tell you facts. For example, if we read the 23rd Psalm we do not say, "I am not a sheep; I do not lie down in green pastures." We know what the picture means, that the Lord cares for us and feeds us, like a shepherd caring for his sheep. Because the Jews lived a long time ago in a distant land, it is not always so easy to understand their pictures.

THE PSALMS

This is the Jewish hymnbook as it was used about 300 B.C. The Jews divided it into five sections: 1 to 41; 42 to 72; 73 to 89; 90 to 106; 107 to 150. This may mean that there were older books which were put together to make the whole collection. One psalm was included twice (14 and 53). Also the names used for God are not the same all through the book. In the first section the name Jahweh (Jehovah) is used very often. In the second section the name Elohim is used. So it looks as though the first section comes from the southern kingdom and the second section from the northern kingdom. People had been writing psalms for many years, and just as in our hymnbooks today, so in the books of psalms these were collected

together, and are not arranged in the order of writing. A good many of the psalms come from the time of the exile and the return to Jerusalem, though some are older than this. Most of the psalms have a name or heading at the top. There are 73 psalms with the name of David, but it seems unlikely that he wrote them all. Several of them speak about the temple, and yet this was not built in the time of David (5, 27, 28, 63, 68). 55 psalms have the name The Chief Musician; 12 have the name Asaph; 11 are to the Sons of Korah. It is thought that these names show the book from which the psalms come. It is very likely that in the temple they used different books, and these may have been called David's Hymnbook, the Chief Musician's Hymnbook, and so on.

There are 15 psalms (120 to 134) called Songs of Ascent. It is thought that these were sung when Jews were climbing up the hills towards Jerusalem, or when they were going up the steps to the holy place in the temple. There are 18 psalms (90 to 108) which the Jews called the Hallelujah psalms. These were sung at the time of the Passover, giving praise to God for His salvation of the people. There is a word "Selah" which comes into many psalms. This is possibly a sign to the people singing, like saying "Pause here". We should leave the word out when we read.

The psalms are a wonderful collection of hymns. Of course there are passages which do not appeal to us today. The Jews did not know Jesus Christ, and so their ideas of God do not always agree with ours. But most of the psalms are truly Christian. They express the feelings of men's hearts before God, their praise for the Mighty Lord of all creation, their sorrow about sin, their desire for help and light. If we want to learn to pray, it is good to read the psalms often. The church has always sung the psalms in its services, and many of our hymns are based on psalms.

JOB

This book is written as a conversation between several people, and its purpose is to deal with the question, "Why

do good people suffer hardship, and what should they do when they suffer?" It begins with an introduction in which God and Satan speak. This is to set the scene for the action on earth which follows. We should not think of this book as history, but rather as a religious story composed by the Jews to help their understanding. It will help you to follow the conversation if you look at this plan of it. The numbers are the chapters in the book:—

Introduction 1-2

| | | | | | |
|-------------|---------|-----------|--------|---------------|--------|
| Job | Eliphaz | Job | Bildad | Job | Zophar |
| 3 | 4-5 | 6-7 | 8 | 9-10 | 11 |
| 12-14 | 15 | 16-17 | 18 | 19 | 20 |
| 21 | 22 | 23-24 | 25 | 26-31 | |
| Elihu 32-37 | | God 38-41 | | Conclusion 42 | |

Many Jews believed, as do many people today, that suffering comes to people because of their sins. So in this story a good man is shown who suffers. He loses all his wealth and his joy in life. His temptation therefore is to accuse God, to say that God is not fair to him. The other people in the story speak to Job, but do not help him very much. They say that he must have sinned somehow, and is only pretending that he has been righteous. But Job cannot think of anything he has done which deserves to be punished like this by God. So Job questions God, asking the reason for his suffering. The answer which God gives in chapters 38 to 41 is that Job should trust in the greatness and power of God. Who is a man to question the acts of God who made heaven and earth? God's wisdom is far above human understanding. Therefore whatever happens to a man is within the power and knowledge of God. The only reply that Job can give to this is to bow down in repentance before God (42, 1-6) and accept His greatness.

The book of Job does not give us a final answer to the hard question of why righteous people suffer. To understand the answer more deeply we have to look at Isaiah

ch. 53 and then at the cross of Jesus. Then perhaps we can understand how the suffering of a good man can bring salvation to others.

PROVERBS

Most nations remember the wisdom of their old people. Sometimes this is in the form of stories, like Job, sometimes it is in short clever sayings which are called proverbs. Just as there is a collection of Jewish proverbs in the Bible, so you could make a book in almost any language in the world. In fact, many of the sayings in the book of Proverbs are similar to sayings of the Egyptians. The purpose of most of the proverbs is to teach people the virtues of a good life. There are proverbs about honesty, obedience to parents, working hard, avoiding bad companions and kindness to others. All that is very necessary in the teaching that we give today. But it is not the whole of religion. It does not speak about the grace of God and His power to renew our lives when we do go astray. So although this book is full of wisdom and useful teaching, it is not a full statement of our faith.

The Jews remembered Solomon as being a very clever man. He did perhaps write down some proverbs. But it is thought that most of this book is not by him. We can understand that if a book of wise sayings was collected together, about 300 B.C., then it might well be given the name "Proverbs of Solomon", just as today we might collect together a book of sayings and call it, "The wisdom of our forefathers". Notice how often in this book the same thing is repeated in slightly different words. Very often the first part of the verse is repeated in the second part. This is because the book is written in poetry. We find the same kind of thing in many of the psalms, and it is called "parallelism" because the two parts run parallel to each other.

ECCLESIASTES

This is a strange book to find in the Bible, because it seems to be without hope. After the Exile the Jews

rebuilt the temple and the city of Jerusalem; they kept all the feasts and services; they expected the full blessings of God to come upon them. But life grew harder instead of easier, and it was not long before new enemies became powerful and conquered the land. So many people gave up hope. It is from a situation like that that the writer of this book took his ideas. He declares that life seems useless, and that there is no real progress. Although we do not believe this (for in Christ we do go forward), yet it is good to remember how many people today feel their lives are useless. This book should help us to understand them and to show them where they can find hope in this dangerous world.

There is a great passage in chapter 3, verses 1 to 9, where the writer reminds us of the right time to do everything in life. This is a lesson we all need to learn. There are times which God chooses. Just as we know the right time to plant our crops, so God has His time for speaking to our hearts. When there is an opportunity for serving Him we must take it, for there may not be another time. The night is coming when we cannot work.

THE SONG OF SOLOMON

A better name for this is Song of Songs, for it is very unlikely that Solomon wrote it himself. It is likely that it was written between 400 and 300 B.C. This is a beautiful group of songs, and we should be thankful that it is included in the Bible. Many people thought that it should not be included. It is a series of love poems, sung by a man and a woman, telling of their love for each other. The book does not mention God, and is not what we would call "religious". Some people try to make it religious by saying that the Bride is the Church, and the Husband is Jesus. But the book is not about these things. It is about human love. How good to have that in the Bible! It makes us understand that our human love for one another has its place in God's plan for the world. It is God who made us so that men and women do love one another; this is one of the foundations on which every Christian marriage is built.

LAMENTATIONS

When Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B.C., it seemed as though the end of everything had come for the Jews. All the beauty of their city was lost, many people were killed, and all their wealth and property had gone. They were refugees. From that situation comes this cry from the heart. It tells us of the ruin of the city, and the suffering of its people. Yet there is still trust in God who will somehow save His people. This book should remind us all of the many thousands of people who are as poor today as the Jews were then. To-day men and women have to leave their homelands, they still see their homes in ruins, they still suffer hunger and pain. We need to have our hearts reminded of God's needy children, and this book can help us to remember them.

RUTH

The most wonderful thing about Ruth is that her name comes into the family of the kings of Judah. She was a foreigner, not a Jew, but through loyalty and love she became part of the line of David and of Jesus. We do not know when this story was first told, or who told it. Probably it was remembered for many generations before it was written down. It may have been written down at a time when the Jews were becoming very proud of their nation and very superior to foreigners. It certainly is a lesson that the stranger should be welcomed and never despised. Do we always welcome the stranger in our land?

The character of Ruth is one of the most beautiful in the Bible. She shows absolute loyalty to her mother-in-law Naomi. She must surely have been afraid of leaving her home country to go and live in a place where she had no friends. She was leaving behind all that she knew. Yet she went on with Naomi, and declared that "your people shall be my people, and your God my God." This is the kind of loyalty that turns people into saints. Jesus needs disciples like this in every land in every age.

ESTHER

This is a strange book to find in the Bible, because it does not speak to us of true religion in the heart, but of the pride of the Jewish nation and the defeat of her enemies. We would agree that it is a good thing to love our country, but it is not true to our faith to rejoice in the defeat and death of our enemies. This story here is set in the time of the Persians, and tells how the oppressed Jews gained a great victory over their enemies by means of the marriage of a Jewish girl to the Persian king. Mordecai is the man who plots the scheme, and who in the end becomes very powerful in the land. Perhaps this book was written at a time when the Jews needed some encouragement. But it cannot be taken as an example of how we ought to act; it is better to see it as a lesson of how nations can fall into temptation through pride.

DANIEL

We often find this book hard to understand. Daniel and Revelation are two books with the same kind of writing, which is called Apocalyptic. They were both written at a time of persecution and reveal God's plan and purpose through visions and dreams. They encourage God's people by showing God's victory. Daniel was probably the last book of the Old Testament to be written, and it is usually thought to have been written during the reign of king Antiochus Epiphanes, about 170 B.C. At that time the religion of the Jews was being attacked. The temple was defiled by pagan soldiers. So this message was written to build up the faith of the people. In it the writer imagines the story of Daniel, who is said to have lived at the time of the Exile in Babylon. There may have been a real man called Daniel, but we cannot be sure. What the writer is saying is, "See how a man of faith acted then, and how God did great things through him, and how God was victorious then. So He will be victorious now."

Daniel in this story was a man of great courage, who refused to bow down to the pagan ways of Babylon, and who was so wise that even the kings of the heathen nations valued his wisdom. By God's grace he was delivered from his enemies, and saw in visions the coming defeat of Babylon. God's kingdom is more powerful than any earthly one. Although men seem so strong, yet God holds all men in His hand. This is a message we all need when we hear of the powerful nations today.

Chapter 6

Between the Old and the New

In the Old Testament we are shown the history of the Jews up to the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. At that time the Persian Empire was the master of the eastern world, and under her rule many Jews were able to return to Palestine. It was hard for them to rebuild the life of the Jewish nation. They were a small people, and the exile had broken them up into still smaller groups, so that they found it hard to act as a united people. But the Persian rulers left them alone and allowed them to rebuild their temple and their homes, so that gradually they did become a nation again.

Around the year 330 B.C. a new empire was born. Alexander the Great, a leader of the Macedonian people of Greece, set out to conquer the world. He succeeded in defeating every enemy he met, and the Persian Empire fell before him. Yet Alexander was only one man, and when he died in 323 B.C. there was no one with his skill to follow him. So his empire broke up, and three kings grabbed whatever land they could, one in Macedonia, one in Egypt and one in Syria. The Egyptian ruling family was called Ptolemy, and under them the Jews had a certain amount of freedom. In 217 B.C. the king of Syria, Antiochus, saw that Egypt was growing weak, and attacked the lands under Egyptian rule; so Palestine passed from Egyptian rule to Syrian rule. Antiochus was not willing to leave the Jews alone. He wanted to change their ways of life and make them follow the ways of Greece. The Jews were unwilling to accept this and resisted. In 168 B.C. Antiochus IV tried to force heathen religion in the Temple at Jerusalem, and to stamp out the worship of the Jews. Under leaders who were called the Maccabees the Jews fought back, and finally, in 142 B.C., the Jews were allowed their freedom.

But this lasted only a short while. Another new empire was growing, the power of Rome. In 63 B.C. the Roman army under Pompey entered Palestine, and for the next hundred years Roman soldiers controlled the land. Under the Romans the Jews were allowed their own kings. These were from the family of Herod the Great, but all the time the real power was not in their hands, but with the Romans.

Through all these struggles for power the Jews kept their faith in God and their loyalty to their old traditions. Just because there were so many strong enemies, their faith became hard and rigid. They felt that they were fighting in defence of all that was holy. So they no longer looked outward, they neglected their calling to proclaim God among the heathen (see Jonah), and they made more and more regulations which governed their religion. During this time the party of the Pharisees grew up; they were the experts on the Law who could give detailed instructions on how God ought to be worshipped. There were also the Sadducees, who were priests, and who determined to keep the whole Law. During this period many books were written, but they are not included in the Bible as we have it today. They are called "The Apocrypha", and include the books of the Maccabees, Esas, Tobit, Judith, Baruch. Much of these writings is taken up with visions like those in Daniel, in which the writers see the power of God to conquer all His enemies.

There were two strong influences in Jewish religion at this time. First there was the growth of legalism, the observance of many little laws, the very careful sacrifices and temple taxes. Second, there was a looking forward in hope to the salvation of God. Just because there were so many difficulties in their lives, the Jews expected that God would come to help them. They thought of the Messiah as the leader whom God would appoint to rescue them from their troubles. God was coming to save, but not in the way they expected. Just because they looked so much on the outward side of religion, they could not see the salvation which Jesus brought. They looked for a kingdom, but not the kingdom of the heart.

Chapter 7

The Good News of Jesus Christ

Above everything else, the New Testament is the good news of what God has done for the world. It tells the story of what happened in Palestine two thousand years ago. It is history. It tells of a man who was born in the little town of Bethlehem, who became a mighty teacher and healer of the sick, who called men to follow him as he wandered through the villages of Galilee, who was attacked by the Jewish leaders and in the end was condemned to death. It tells of his painful death and of the empty tomb which revealed the fact that he was no longer dead. It tells of the power of this man to speak to his followers and inspire them. It tells of the Holy Spirit coming to men's hearts and forcing them to speak what they knew of Jesus, making them no longer just a group of followers, but a single fellowship with a mission to the ends of the earth. It tells of the spread of this message from the little land of Palestine as far as the mighty city of Rome.

The New Testament declares that all these things were not the work of men, but of God. In this man Jesus, God came to earth. He came to establish a Kingdom, and the beginnings of this Kingdom are seen in the followers who were the first church. This was the fulfilment of the Old Testament. God called Israel to be His servant, but Israel became blind to the calling, so in Christ a new Israel was born and exists to serve God. God gave the old covenant which was established through sacrifices. In Christ He gives the new covenant and establishes it in the one great sacrifice on Calvary. God gave the old law to show Israel how to live. In Christ He establishes the heart of the law and reveals its true purpose as everlasting love. What they in the Old Testament were looking for we, through Jesus Christ, have found.

If we were to choose two verses which express the

whole message of the New Testament, we all would think of different verses. For me the message is most clearly stated in 2 Corinthians 5:19 and John 3:16. "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation." "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life." Here is the origin of the work (God's love), the cost of the work (He gave), the method of the work (God was in Christ), the result of the work (everlasting life), the way we find that life (believing), and the way in which the work still continues (reconciliation is entrusted to us). The Kingdom of God exists wherever men are in fellowship with God and with each other. The most startling effect of this in the New Testament is the way in which Gentiles entered into the fellowship. When the disciples started preaching, they had no idea that their work would reach the Gentiles. Yet the Holy Spirit led them to accept as brothers the Greeks, the Romans, the Galatians and so on, who believed in Jesus. So the power of Christ was not just something preached about; it was a fact.

The books of the New Testament in our Bibles are not arranged in the order in which they were written. It is very likely that some of Paul's letters were the very first books to be written, and that Mark's Gospel was written before Matthew's. At first, of course, the story of Jesus was not written down at all, but spoken. While the apostles were alive they told the story, and there did not seem to be any need for books. In those days, too, there was not a good postal service between countries, so that each church had to preserve the Gospel in the best way it could. Many churches did begin to write down the stories they had heard from their teachers, and they were not all quite the same. So by the year 150 A.D. there were quite a lot of books which were just used locally in one district. It was not for many years after that that the actual list of books which make up the New Testament was first written down, and the books themselves were copied by hand and distributed to different places. Now we look at these books as we have them today.

Chapter 8

Matthew, Mark and Luke

These three books are often called “the synoptic Gospels”. The word simply means “having one eye”; that is, having one view of Jesus. In each of the three Jesus speaks mainly the same words, and does many of the same things. The three are alike, and seem quite distinct from John. If we read these three Gospels side by side, we soon discover that nearly all of Mark is repeated in one or other of the others. There are 662 verses in Mark. Of these, 609 are also in Matthew, and nearly 400 are also in Luke. It seems most unlikely that three people would write down so much in exactly the same words, and it is much simpler to believe that two of the writers were copying from the third. It is clear which one was being copied. Matthew and Luke do not use the same verses from Mark; Matthew repeats some and Luke repeats others. So clearly it was not Matthew or Luke which came first, but Mark. All the evidence we have supports this view.

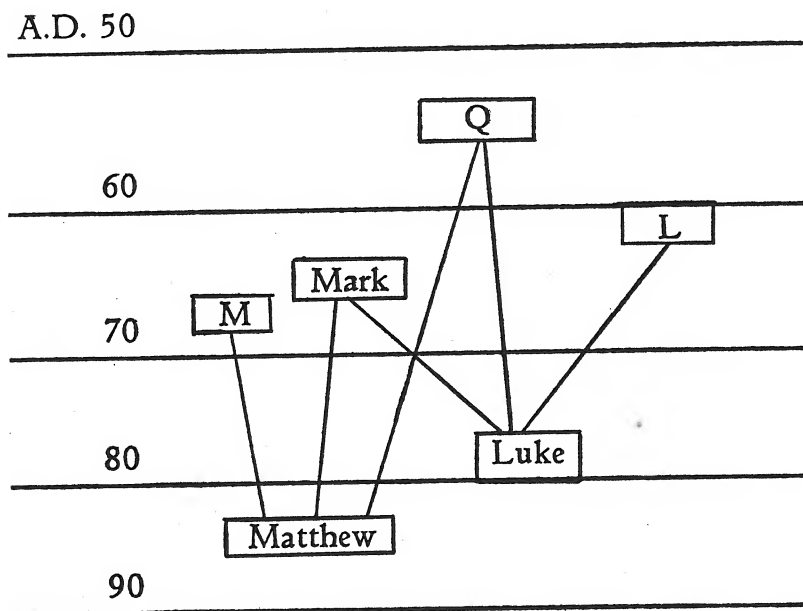
But if we look again at Matthew and Luke we find that they have verses which are the same and are not in Mark at all. There are about 160 verses like this. How did these two writers write down so much that was the same? Where did it come from? The answer which most people give is that both of them were using another book, which has been lost. This lost book is usually given the name Q (from the German word “Quelle”, a source). For examples of this Q material see:

Luke 7, 1-10; Matthew 8, 5-10

Luke 11, 9-13; Matthew 7, 7-11

Luke 12, 22-34; Matthew 6, 25-33

You will see that these verses are mostly the sayings of Jesus, and probably Q was a collection of his sayings. It may have been one of the very first books to be written about Jesus. Much of the sermon on the mount comes from it. The probable order of these books is, therefore, Q, Mark, Luke using Q and Mark and some of his own material, then Matthew using Q and Mark and using his own material. Luke and Matthew both have some verses which are not in any other book; they had their own sources, and we can call them L and M. This may be clearer in the following diagram:—



We know a little about the places where these books were written. Mark was the book of the church at Rome; M seems to have been linked with Judea, and L with Caesarea. The dates given in the diagram are not to be taken as the exact years when these books were written. It is not possible to be sure of any actual years, but within ten years these given are probably correct.

MARK

Two of the leaders of the church wrote down what they knew of this Gospel. One was Papias, who wrote at the end of the first century, "Mark, having become the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately all that he remembered of the things done and said by Christ, but not however in order." About 185 A.D. Irenaeus wrote, "After their deaths (Peter and Paul) Mark the disciple and interpreter of Peter himself also handed down to us in writing the things which Peter had proclaimed." So we can imagine at Rome the church eagerly listening to the preaching of Peter, and Mark making notes of what was said. This Gospel is, therefore, firmly based on the words of a man who was there, who listened to Jesus, and who was a witness of the resurrection. The Gospel is Peter's story of Jesus. He did not hide his own failings. We know that Mark had a Christian mother (Acts 12, 12), and that he went with Paul and Barnabas on the first missionary journey (Acts 13). He was a cousin of Barnabas (Colossians 4, 10) and Paul valued his friendship (2 Timothy 4, 10) and he became a close follower of Peter in Rome (1 Peter 5, 13). So he was a man well qualified to write down the Gospel.

The Gospel is written in very clear, direct language, as though by an eye-witness. In almost every story there are words which probably would have been forgotten by most people, but were remembered by Peter because he was there. He remembers Jesus being asleep on the pillow in the boat (4, 38), and how the madman among the tombs cut himself with stones (5, 5). He remembers how when the blind man was given his sight, he first of all saw men as trees walking (8, 24). He remembers the actual Aramaic words which Jesus used. (Aramaic was the language of the northern part of Palestine which had become common at the time of Jesus.) See 5, 41; 7, 34; 15, 34.

The Gospel speaks of Jesus as the Messiah, but there is an almost secret way of revealing it. Often Jesus told people to be silent about the great miracles he had per-

formed. (1, 43; 5, 43; 7, 36; 8, 26.) Jesus does not make any clear announcement to the people that he is the Messiah. When the High Priest asks him the question, "Art thou the Christ the Son of the Blessed?" Jesus simply answers, "I am" (14, 61). Here right at the end Jesus acknowledges who he is. He is the one who can say "I am", and accept for himself the holy name of God. This Gospel very clearly sees the cross as the most important moment in the life of Jesus. Almost one-third of the Gospel deals with the death of Jesus, and there are words about the cross early in the Gospel (2, 20; 3, 6). Peter knew that in this act of suffering there was real hope for the world, for he himself had been humbled then, he had betrayed his master, and through his sorrow had found full discipleship. Because this Gospel speaks to us with the voice of Peter we can turn to it as a vivid, accurate account of the life of Jesus.

LUKE

We know of Luke as the companion of Paul. While Paul was in prison at Caesarea, Luke was close by, and probably started writing down stories of Jesus which he heard there. We have seen that he used both Q and Mark, but he found many stories of his own. He found the birth stories in chapters 1 and 2; perhaps he heard them from Mary herself. He collected a series of parables; the good Samaritan (10), the rich fool (12), the fig tree (13), the lost coin and the two sons (15), the unjust steward, and the rich man and Lazarus (16), the unjust judge (18). All these wonderful stories we owe to Luke. He also gives us the wonderful resurrection story of the road to Emmaus.

Luke was a Gentile, and he was writing for Gentiles. Theophilus is a Greek name. So the feeling of this Gospel is that Jesus is for the whole world, not just for the Jews. Luke does not speak much about the Old Testament or about Jewish customs. When he writes down his list of the ancestors of Jesus he goes back not to Abraham, the father of the Jews, but to Adam, the father of all men. He gives Greek names rather than Hebrew ones; Golgotha is called Kranion, the place of a skull; Jesus is called

Master, not Rabbi. When he wants to give a date of the birth of Jesus, he refers to the Roman Emperor, not to the Jewish king. The Gospel is to be preached to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem (24, 47). Because Luke was writing for Gentiles his Gospel is perhaps the easiest for us to understand. We are not Jews, and often find Jewish thinking difficult to follow, but in this Gospel we can understand all that happens, because Luke is writing for people like us.

Luke was a doctor (Colossians 4, 14), and was naturally interested in sick people. He also thought a lot about the poor and despised people whom Jesus had helped. He speaks of the woman who was a sinner (7, 36) and about Zacchaeus (19), and about the penitent thief (23, 39). He was a man interested in people rather than in theology, and we love his Gospel because it shows us how Jesus spoke to men and women and healed them.

This Gospel is also the clearest record we have of the prayers of Jesus. At the great moments of his life he prayed, and Luke records this fact. He prayed at his baptism (3, 21), before his first dispute with the Pharisees (5, 16), before he challenges the disciples and speaks of his own death (9, 18), at the transfiguration (9, 29), and upon the cross (23, 46): Look up these verses and see what they teach us about the reason why Jesus prayed. This will help us to pray like he did.

MATTHEW

This is what Papias wrote, about 125 A.D., "Matthew, in the Hebrew tongue, compiled the Sayings, and each one interpreted them according to his ability." Is that book of the sayings of Jesus the Gospel that we have in our Bibles? Probably not, because our Gospel of Matthew contains much more than just sayings. So this first book of sayings is probably one of the sources of our present Gospel, which was called "Matthew" because it contained Matthew's collection of sayings. If we study the Gospel, it is not hard to guess what the original book of sayings was like. There is a large number of references to the Old

Testament, each showing how Jesus acted "in order that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets." See 1, 22; 2, 5; 2, 15; 2, 17; 2, 23; 3, 3; 4, 14; 8, 17; 12, 17. So here is the original work of Matthew, who loved the Old Testament, and saw how Jesus was always fulfilling what the prophets had spoken. The whole Gospel points to Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of David, who is the servant of whom we read in Isaiah 53. The Gospel seems to have been written mainly for Jews, to convince them that the Saviour for whom they were waiting had in fact come, had been put to death, and was arisen with power.

In this Gospel we notice how verses about a subject are all grouped together, and the teaching of Jesus is given in long sermons. So we have the sermon on the mount (Ch. 5 to 7); the sermon to the disciples when they were sent out to preach (10); the parables of the Kingdom (13); the sayings about true greatness and forgiveness (18); and sayings about the end of the world (24 and 25). It seems likely that this arrangement was the work of an editor who had several books before him, perhaps Mark, Q and M, and brought together the verses on one subject.

The Gospel of Matthew shows some of the Jewish hope for the future. There are passages about the end of the world, in chapters 24 and 25, which clearly look forward to a day of judgement, when the Lord will establish his Kingdom. There are also several passages only in Matthew where God acts with strange power. Peter walks on the water; a coin is found in the mouth of a fish; Pilate's wife has a dream; at the time of the cross tombs open and the dead rise; an angel rolls the stone away from the tomb. All this suggests that the writer of these passages was very close to the Jewish way of thought, which is called apocalyptic. This Gospel also is the one that speaks most clearly about the birth of the Church. See 16, 18-19; 18, 17-20; 28, 19. It is as though the writer is pointing to the birth of the new Israel when the old Israel rejects the Messiah. So this Gospel is not just a message for Jews, but for all who in accepting Jesus Christ enter into the new covenant.

Chapter 9

The Gospel of John and the Letters of John

THE GOSPEL

The writer of this book tells us why he is writing it. "These things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name." (20, 31.) Everything that is written is for this purpose. John is not trying to present to us the complete facts of the life of Jesus. He selects the stories which will achieve this purpose. He is not trying to repeat the things that the other three Gospels have said, but to reveal the meaning behind those facts. The result is that in this Gospel we have a deep interpretation of the life of Jesus. Clement of Alexandria wrote, "Last of all John, perceiving that the bodily facts had been set forth in the Gospels, being urged by his friends and inspired by the Spirit, composed a spiritual Gospel." Because it is indeed a spiritual Gospel, we can only understand it through the Spirit in our own hearts. Origen wrote, "No one can understand the meaning of it unless he has lain on Jesus' breast, and received from him Mary to be his mother also."

The Gospel starts with a great chapter of theology, a statement about God and Jesus Christ. John speaks of the work of the Logos from the beginning. By using this word Logos he means the active expression of God. Just as we need words to express what we think, so the Logos (which is the Greek for "word") is God declaring Himself, revealing Himself. This Logos exists with God from all eternity, and is not something which is made. The Logos is what every man knows of God, for no man knows anything of God unless God Himself is active. This Logos is what appeared walking the streets of Palestine. The

Logos became flesh. This is the miracle which filled the heart of John, and which he believed was the means of salvation for all men who believed it. John does not tell us about the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem; instead he gives us this understanding of the eternal God and His coming to earth.

John does not tell us of all the miracles that Jesus did. He selects seven which are signs of the power and the love of God:—

- 1 Water into wine, 2, 1-11. Christ gives new life.
- 2 Nobleman's son, 4, 46-54. Faith in Christ gives life.
- 3 Sick man by the pool, 5, 2-9. Christ gives new power.
- 4 Feeding the 5000, 6, 4-13. Christ is our food.
- 5 Walking on the water, 6, 16-21. Christ is our guide.
- 6 Man born blind, 9, 1-7. Christ is our light.
- 7 Lazarus, 11, 1-44. Christ is our life.

Sometimes, as in chapter 6, John explains the meaning of the sign; sometimes we are left to understand it for ourselves. We should ask the question, "What does this miracle show of how Jesus works today in our lives?"

John does not give us parables as the other Gospels do. Instead he gives us statements about Jesus, describing what he is. There are seven of these:

- 1 I am the bread of life. 6, 35.
- 2 I am the Light of the world. 8, 12.
- 3 I am the door of the sheep. 10, 7.
- 4 I am the Good Shepherd. 10, 11.
- 5 I am the resurrection and the life. 11, 25.
- 6 I am the true vine. 15, 1.
- 7 I am the way, the truth and the life. 14, 6.

When we read these we should ask the question, "Is this what Jesus means to me?" These statements are not really parables, but they teach us about Jesus, just as the parables teach us about the Kingdom of God.

This Gospel does not speak much of the Kingdom (only in chapter 3), but speaks instead of eternal life. This phrase does mean that the life goes on for ever and does not die. But it also means a new and different kind of life, a life lived with the spirit of God in our hearts, a life which begins as soon as we receive the forgiveness of God. It is not just something in the future; it can start today. John speaks much of this life. He also speaks of Jesus as the light, and shows how dark the world without him is.

We cannot be quite sure who wrote this Gospel, though we can be sure that John the Apostle, the son of Zebedee, was connected with it. John is mentioned in the Gospel as "the beloved disciple", and this lovely name would be more usual if he did not write it himself; he would hardly boast like that. It is usually thought that John lived to be an old man in the town of Ephesus, and we can imagine him teaching there, just as Peter taught in Rome. Someone probably wrote down his words, and thought deeply about them. Then he composed this Gospel, based on what John had heard and seen. It is thought that he wrote it between 90 and 100 A.D.

THE LETTERS OF JOHN

In the first letter there is no statement about who wrote it or of the people who were to read it. In fact, it is more like a sermon than a personal letter. But when we compare this letter with John's Gospel, then we feel sure that they are both written by the same man. In the letter there is just the same kind of words, the same thinking about the light and the darkness as we meet in the Gospel. We can understand what a great help this letter must have been to the Church, for it speaks so clearly about the nature of Jesus Christ and the life that he gives to men.

Perhaps the best verse to summarise the message of the letter is 5, 11, "This is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son." It is as men find this life that they do love one another and show forth the kind of light that shone so clearly in Jesus. The letter

insists that the sort of life which we live is closely connected with our faith. If we do have eternal life in our hearts, then we shall love our brethren. If we do not love our brethren then we have not received eternal life. So our faith in God, the forgiveness which He offers to us, and the life we live in the power of the Spirit are all tied together.

The second and third letters are rather different. They are written by "the elder". He does not give his name. An elder was a leader of the church, often like our pastors today, and in the early days he might have been an apostle. But if an apostle were writing he would normally use that title rather than elder. So we usually think of these letters as written by a senior minister of the early church to help a group of Christians, possibly around Ephesus. The second letter is addressed to "the elect lady and her children", and this may mean a Christian lady who used her house for the meetings of the local Church. The third letter is addressed to Gaius, and he may have been the senior man in that local congregation. It speaks of the danger of a man called Diotrephes, who thinks a lot of himself and respects no one else. The Church has always been in danger from such people, and needs the reminder that he who does evil has not even seen God or understood the Gospel.

Chapter 10

The Book of Acts

This book follows the Gospel of Luke. The opening verses show that it is by the same man and addressed to the same Theophilus. Luke was a companion of Paul, and much of Acts is taken up with the story of Paul's travels. The other stories must have been told to Luke by some of the disciples, perhaps at Caesarea, when Luke was waiting for Paul's trial. This book is of very great value to us because it shows what happened when the Holy Spirit entered into men's hearts, how the first Christian Church lived, and how the work grew in spite of all opposition.

A key verse is 1, 8. Here Jesus gives his last command to the men who were to carry on his work. They are to be witnesses; that is, they are to show the world the truth. And the book of Acts tells us how they obeyed that command. They did witness in Jerusalem (chapters 1 to 7), in all Judea and Samaria (8 to 11), and to the end of the world as they knew it, even as far as Rome itself (12 to 28). This work was done in spite of great opposition. The leaders of the Jewish religion opposed it, partly because they were frightened of the number of people who were following Jesus, and partly because they really believed Jesus was mistaken. So they put apostles in prison. The Roman authorities opposed it, because they thought it disturbed the peace of their empire, and later on they tried to make all men worship Caesar. Even some members of the Church itself opposed the spread of the Gospel. They thought the good news was for Jews only, and that if any Gentile wanted to follow Jesus, then he must first become a Jew and obey the Jewish law. But in spite of all this opposition, the power of the Holy Spirit sent the message forward into the hearts of men in every land.

In the first part of the book Peter is the leader. He is the man bold enough to stand up and speak in public; he is the man who makes decisions. He is the first to realise that Gentiles too may receive the Holy Spirit (chapters 10 and 11). But it was James who seems to have become the chairman of the Church in Jerusalem. In chapter 15 it is James who gives the final decision at the council meeting, and we do not know much of the work and position of Peter. The reason for this is that from chapter 13 onwards Luke is writing chiefly about Paul, and does not write about the Jerusalem church. It may be that one of the reasons why Luke wrote the book was to show that Paul was indeed a true apostle. He shows how Paul received a vision of Jesus (9), just as Peter had (Luke 24, 34); Paul healed a lame man (14, 8), just as Peter had done (3, 2); Paul healed an unclean spirit (16, 18), just as Peter had done (5, 16); Paul brought Eutychus from death (20, 9), just as Peter brought Dorcas from death (9, 36); the Holy Spirit came to Paul's converts (19, 6), as He had come to Peter's converts (10, 44). Paul is also shown as following Jesus. When Jesus heard his call from heaven he went out to the desert. Paul, when he had received his vision, went to Arabia. Just as Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem into danger, so did Paul. All this suggests that Luke wanted to show men that Paul was a real apostle, just as much an apostle as Peter.

It may be that the book was written when Paul was in prison at Rome. The last chapter ends with Paul in prison for two years waiting for his trial, and perhaps Luke hoped that his book would help Paul during his trial. He had shown in his book how the Gospel reached the cities of Europe, and brings the story to its close in the heart of the Empire. We ought always to remember the wonder of the story. At the beginning there were a few men in a room in Jerusalem, and none of them had any idea of preaching to the heathen. Everything seemed to be against them. Yet by the end of the book there is a Christian church in all the main cities of Greece and Asia Minor. There is no explanation for this triumph of the Gospel, unless we believe in the power of the Holy Spirit in the Church.

We know something of Luke from the letters of Paul. See Colossians 4, 14; Philemon 24; 2 Timothy 4, 11. We also read of him in a book by Eusebius, who wrote at the start of the third century, "Luke, by nation a Syrian of Antioch, a disciple of the apostles, was afterwards a follower of Paul until his martyrdom, serving the Lord blamelessly. For having neither wife nor children, he died in Bithynia at the age of seventy-four, filled with the Holy Spirit." As we read Acts we can think of this first Christian doctor travelling with Paul. In the chapters where we read "we" went to this place, then we know that at that point Luke was beside Paul.

Chapter 11

The Letters of Paul

Paul wrote his letters to churches that he loved. He heard of their troubles and their joys, and in his letters he tries to answer their problems and encourage them in the Christian life. Although he wrote so long ago, his letters help us because the things which trouble us in the Church today are often the same things which happened in Corinth and Galatia at that time. The help which Paul gives is just as valuable today, because it is so firmly based on Jesus Christ. Every problem in the Church that he deals with in his letters is answered in the spirit of Jesus. Paul not only answers questions, he also teaches the fullness of the Gospel to people who had only recently become Christians, and he defends the truth of the Gospel against all its enemies. Probably many of Paul's letters have been lost, and we are thankful to those early churches which kept their letters so carefully that we can read them today. In our Bible the letters are arranged in order of their length; the longest one first. They were not written in this order. Probably Galatians and Thessalonians came first, then Corinthians and Romans, and then the letters written in the prison in Rome, Ephesians, Colossians and Philippians. Here we shall look at the letters in their Bible order.

ROMANS

In this letter Paul was writing to people whom he had not met. He had heard much about the little Church in the city of Caesar, the capital of the Empire. He felt called to go there himself. He writes to them to set forth the Gospel and so to prepare the way for his own personal visit to them. This letter gives us the fullest expression of

the meaning of the Gospel that we have in Paul's letters. The central theme is the righteousness of God, and how this righteousness is given by God to men of faith. This is the salvation of Christ. But there is another side to righteousness, that is judgement. Paul does not hide the fact that sin is punished. This is not something which Paul made up for himself; it is clear in the Gospels themselves.

The first section of the letter (1, 1 to 3, 20) looks at the condition of the world. Both Jews and Gentiles alike have disobeyed God. In the Gentile world men have failed to follow what they know to be good, and have chosen evil. The Jews have disobeyed, although they had been given so much of God's truth. So all the world deserves judgement and punishment. In the next section (3, 21 to 4, 25) Paul speaks of the hope of salvation. A way of deliverance has been opened, not just for Jews, but for all men who have faith. Even the Old Testament shows this, for Abraham was accepted by God through his faith long before the Law came to Moses. In chapters 5 to 8 Paul speaks of the life of faith. Jesus Christ died and rose from death. So we die to the old life of sin and are raised up again by the power of God into a new life with Christ. Before we were slaves to sin; now we are real children to God. The Holy Spirit enables us to live a life of righteousness, and keeps us close to God. In chapters 9 to 11 Paul looks again at the Jews, his own people, who had been so disobedient. He feels certain that God has a purpose for them, and that purpose is salvation. They had been given the Law and they had been given Christ. But they refused these gifts. So Israel cannot escape from punishment, and God will fulfil His purpose among the Gentiles. Yet if the Jews repent, then surely they will be saved. In the last section, chapters 12 to 16, Paul looks at the life of Christian people. How can our lives be close to God? It is by the offering of ourselves as a willing sacrifice and by loving our brethren. The work of the Gospel is seen in our daily lives.

The most difficult parts of this letter for us to understand are the verses where Paul uses the Old Testament to convince Jews of his message. We should remember

that as a young man Paul was trained as a Pharisee, and that he uses the scriptures as the Jews did, by picking out verses that support his argument. The most helpful verses for us are those in which Paul speaks of Christian experience. He speaks about the struggle between sin and righteousness in his own heart, and how the victory came to him (ch. 7), and this chapter speaks to us all. He declares the certainty of the Gospel. It is the love of Christ which is the most certain thing in life (ch. 8). Therefore Paul can shout with joy, "I am not ashamed of the Gospel; it is the power of God for salvation" (1, 16).

1 AND 2 CORINTHIANS

Paul wrote several letters to Corinth, and they seem to have been mixed up. In 1 Corinthians 5, 9, he speaks of "the letter I wrote to you", so although it is called 1 Corinthians in the Bible, it cannot be the first letter he wrote to Corinth. In 2 Corinthians 2, 3-4, he speaks of a sorrowful letter which he had written "with many tears". That does not sound like 1 Corinthians, which has much hope and joy in it as well as sorrow. Looking at 2 Corinthians, there seems to be a break at the end of chapter 9. Chapters 10 to 13 are very stern and severe, and may be a separate letter, the sorrowful letter mentioned in chapter 2. So it is possible that there were four letters to Corinth:

- 1 The letter mentioned in 1 Corinthians 5, 9, which has been lost.
- 2 1 Corinthians.
- 3 2 Corinthians ch. 10 to 13; the sorrowful letter.
- 4 2 Corinthians ch. 1 to 9.

Paul was staying in Ephesus when he received news from the church in Corinth in a letter from them (1 Cor. 7, 1), and through friends who had just returned (1 Cor. 1, 11). He cannot leave Ephesus at once to visit Corinth, so he deals with their questions in a letter which we have as 1 Corinthians. He starts off by speaking of the divisions in the Church at Corinth which were spoiling its Christian witness. He shows how all Christian people

are one because they have one Lord and Saviour. He preached Christ to them, so let them be one in Christ. Paul says he is only a servant of God, and that he has to act as a steward of the Gospel. Then in chapters 5 to 11 he deals with other difficulties in the Church. There have been cases of very sinful behaviour, there have been Christians who have taken their quarrels before the heathen courts of law; there have been discussions about marriage and its place in the Christian life; there has been a difficulty over food which had been offered to idols in the heathen temples; there were questions about the right way to behave in church worship. In each case Paul leads the minds of the Corinthians to what they know of Jesus; that is the only way they can solve their problems. So he speaks to them of the love that Christians should have for each other as being the one great guide of conduct. He reminds them of the words of Jesus at the Last Supper to show them the meaning of this holy feast.

Then in chapters 12 to 14 he deals with the gifts of the Spirit. All of us know how God does give to us gifts through the Spirit; some people are given the gift of great knowledge or great power to speak, or a joyful heart. The early Church honoured the gifts of God. Some of them were rather strange. There was much excitement in the early Church fellowship, and people sometimes stood up and spoke in strange sounds, not in their own language at all. This was called "speaking with tongues". There were also people who had gifts of healing the sick and of prophesying. Paul wants the Corinthians to have a right view of these gifts of the Spirit, so he first tells them of the unity of the church. However many different gifts there are, all of them are given to the one body of Christ, and must not lead some people to break away from the Church. They should remember that love is the greatest gift of all. Paul writes a wonderful picture of what Christian love is (13).

In the last section he speaks of resurrection and eternal life. He again bases all he says on Jesus Christ. It is because Jesus rose from death that we can believe in God's power to conquer death. Paul believes that in our life

after death we shall still be real people though living in the spirit and not in the physical body. For Paul this life after death is more than a hope, it is a certainty because of Jesus. So he can give us the words of victory, "Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." (15, 57.)

When you read 2 Corinthians, look for the things it tells us about the man Paul himself. He speaks here about his own Christian witness. He tells the Corinthians of his sufferings for Jesus (11, 23 to 12, 10). He says that his pain has been both physical (12, 7) and spiritual (11, 28). Yet in spite of this he is glad to suffer (12, 10) because such pain is a share in the actual suffering of Jesus for the world. It is like taking part in a procession of triumph with Jesus at the head (2, 14). As we read the list of his sufferings, we realise that the story in Acts is not a complete one, and that only a man who was filled with the Spirit could go through so much for the sake of Jesus. The last four chapters of the letter are a defence of his own position and right to be a preacher. They are stern words to people who are tempted to forsake him.

In chapters 8 and 9 he calls on the Church to complete its work of love by collecting money for the poor people in Jerusalem. Paul is not ashamed of asking for money for the sake of others, though he never asks anything for himself. He thinks that giving is a Christian duty because Jesus gave everything, his own life, for us. Such cheerful giving is a mark of the Christian, the man who is reborn. Paul has shown by his own life that he had become a new man (5, 17), and proclaims that this experience is for all those who have faith in Jesus.

GALATIANS

This may have been the first letter Paul wrote. Soon after he left the young Churches of Asia (in Lystra, Derbe, Iconium) he heard very sad news about them. Other preachers had arrived and were at work. They were men who had heard the Gospel, but thought the work of Jesus was just a part of the Jewish religion. So

they taught that anyone who wanted to follow Jesus must also follow the whole law of the Old Testament. The people of Galatia were in danger of falling into this way of thought. This whole question was discussed at the Council in Jerusalem which is recorded in Acts 15. That Council decided that when Gentiles became Christians they need not follow the whole law. This letter of Paul seems to have been written before the Council, because he makes no mention of this decision. He writes immediately he hears of the trouble, perhaps when he reached Antioch after the first journey.

In the letter he states his belief in Christian freedom. He does not condemn the law as something evil in itself. He thinks that there was a purpose of God in the law, and that purpose was to lead men towards Jesus Christ. The law by itself could not save men from their sins. It is only faith in Jesus which can do that. So to return to the law is to forsake the new life which Jesus offers; it is to leave the kingdom of grace for the kingdom of law and punishment. As in Romans, he refers to Abraham (ch. 3), who was accepted because of faith. Abraham listened to God and obeyed God; that was the beginning of God's promise to His chosen people. It was because the Jews refused to listen and obey that they killed Jesus. The new Israel, the Church, must still listen and obey if it is to remain God's instrument in the world.

These preachers who were upsetting the churches in Galatia also attacked Paul. They said that he had no right to be a preacher because he was not one of the twelve apostles. In this letter Paul declares his calling by God. He was shown the good news by Jesus himself in the vision.

He did not have to be taught by the apostles to know Jesus. There was one time when he felt compelled to disagree with Peter in public, and that was over the unity of Jew and Gentile in the Church. He feels quite confident of starting his letter, "Paul an apostle, not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ." It is this calling and this salvation through faith that enables men to walk in the Spirit. In chapter 5, 16-26, Paul speaks of

the two ways of life that are open to us, the life of the flesh and the life of the Spirit. Paul had shown in his own life what this means. He had walked according to the flesh, with its human desires and its religion centred on what men can do. Then he was reborn and walked according to the Spirit. Why then should any man want to return to the old slavery? He calls on the Galatians to stand fast.

EPHESIANS

Paul had stayed for over two years in Ephesus, and he knew the members of the Church there very well. When he was in prison in Rome he remembered them and wrote them this letter. In it he looks at the whole of God's plan from the beginning of time (ch. 1) and the place in that plan of the fellowship of Christians which is the Church. God's plan is from the beginning of time until the end of time (1, 4 and 1, 10), but it is made clear most of all in Jesus and the work that Jesus did. Paul prays that the Christian people may enter fully into their part of the work of Christ. They can only do this if they see Christ as their head (1, 22). In chapter 2 Paul starts with a hymn of praise to God for the wonderful grace of Jesus, and then speaks of the unity which has come into the world through Him. This is the heart of the letter.

The world was then divided by many barriers. Jew never met with Gentile, never ate with a Gentile, never worshipped with a Gentile. Yet in Christ a new unity has become possible. He will build his own new temple, not in Jerusalem, but in the fellowship of the Church (2, 21), which is to be a dwelling place for the Spirit. Chapter 3 tells how this great message had come into Paul's own heart, and then in 14 to 21 he prays for the Church. Look at this prayer and see if we can pray like this. May Christ dwell in our hearts through faith, and may we all learn with the whole Church the wideness of the love of God. Paul knows that alone we can only learn a little; it is with all the saints that we see the glory of God. In chapter 4 Paul goes back to the theme of unity. He wants to see

this unity in the life of each congregation. All the work, all the varied offices of the local Church, are to be aimed at the unity of the body, with Christ as the head.

In the last part of the letter Paul shows how the spirit of Christ is to be shown in the way men behave towards one another. Husbands and wives, children and parents, slaves and masters, all must live in the spirit of unity and love. Ch. 5, 14 is probably a verse from a very old Christian hymn. In 6, 10-20, we hear Paul speaking from his own experience. Sitting in Rome, with the guards all round his prison, he knows that the Christian needs all the weapons of faith. He looks at a soldier and sees how he is covered with armour and has a strong sword in his hand. The Christian must be just as well prepared for the battle of faith. Only in this way can we march towards the final home, which is the Kingdom of Christ and of God (5, 5).

PHILIPPIANS

This is one of the happiest letters that Paul wrote. The key word is "joy". Paul rejoices in all that has happened to him, and will even rejoice if his trial in Rome leads to his death. He rejoices in the Church at Philippi, which had always remained faithful. He rejoices most of all in the Lord (3, 1), who gives us the fruit of righteousness (1, 11). The Christian people at Philippi, and probably in other places too, were very sad over Paul's imprisonment. They thought that this was a defeat. Paul says that it is not a defeat; it has brought fresh opportunity to preach the Gospel (1, 12) for the whole of the guard has now heard the message.

The Christians at Philippi had sent to Paul a gift to help him while he was in Rome, and this letter is written to say "Thank you" to them (4, 14-18). The gift had come through Epaphroditus, and he is going to carry this letter back (2, 25-30). In spite of the happy feeling between Paul and this Church, he does not forget that there are still things in its life which need to be put right. So he

speaks to two women, Euodia and Syntyche, to make peace between them (4, 2).

In chapter 2, verses 1 to 11, Paul gives the Philippians a great lesson in humility. He looks at Jesus and sees in him the great model of real humility. For Jesus put aside all his glory in order to become a man, and when he became a man he still did not grasp at power, but became like a servant, even to the extent of dying on a cross. Paul may have in his mind the story of Adam in Genesis. Adam was made in the likeness of God, but he thought that power was something to be grasped, so he was disobedient. Therefore God humbled him. Jesus put aside his power and was obedient unto death, and therefore God has exalted him. Jesus is the second Adam who redeems men, who wins them back from their pride and disobedience. In chapter 3, 12 to 14, Paul speaks of his own Christian experience, and this shows us humility in action. Even Paul, who was such a great leader of the Church, does not think that he has reached the goal. He knows that he still has to press forward to become still more like Jesus. In chapter 4, verse 8, he shows us one way in which we can do that. It is by thinking continually of the best things that we can clear the evil thoughts out of our hearts.

COLOSSIANS

The town of Colossae was in Asia, close to Laodicea, and as far as we know, Paul did not visit it himself. The church was probably founded by Epaphras (1, 5-7), who reported to Paul the news of how the Christians there were being troubled. There were many pagan religions at that time which gave great importance to angels and other spiritual beings. Such beliefs often said that the world and the flesh that we know are evil, and that only spiritual things are good. It was thought that Jesus must have been lower than the angels, just because Jesus had a physical body. Many Christians were troubled by such thoughts as these. So Paul writes to them from Rome to confirm their faith in Jesus.

In the first chapter Paul sets forth the position of Jesus. Read verses 15 to 20. Jesus is not something which God has created. He is God; he is the creator; he is before all things. So it is not right to say that any spiritual being is above Jesus. Even the angels are created. But Jesus is not created; he is God. Therefore any worship of angels is not part of the Christian faith. This teaching is carried on in chapter 2, 8 to 15. Paul would certainly agree that the coming of Jesus to the earth is a great mystery which we cannot explain; yet the fact of it is clear. In Jesus God dwelt bodily. This reminds us of the first chapter of John's Gospel, and is the faith which we all hold today.

In 2, 11 to 14, and 3, 1 to 11, Paul speaks to the Colossians about the Christian experience of death and resurrection. This is one of Paul's favourite ways of describing the Christian life, and we ought to take note of it. In order to become a Christian there has to be a death. The old ways and desires of our hearts have to be killed. Then something new is born, and new life comes into us. It is not just our life, but the life of the Holy Spirit. This is a resurrection in our hearts. For Paul the service of baptism is the outward sign of this happening in a man. He is buried in the water and rises out of it as a sign of his new life. When he was writing it was the usual thing for baptism to be given to adults when they entered the Church. When we have a service of baptism and small babies are baptised, we cannot see this as a sign of death and resurrection in the same way. But the experience of which Paul speaks here should be the experience of every Christian life. It is because we have been reborn in the Spirit that we have to live the kind of life that is fit for our new nature (3, 10).

1 AND 2 THESSALONIANS

These are among the first letters that Paul wrote. He visited Thessalonica when he crossed from Asia into Greece on his second missionary journey. He was thrown out of the town, but stayed there long enough to start a small church. He travelled on to Athens, and then wanted

to return to Thessalonica to see how the church was keeping its faith. But instead of going himself, he sent Timothy. When Timothy returned, Paul was at Corinth, and it was there that the two men talked together. The news which Timothy brought was very good. The church was standing firm. Paul wanted to write a letter and tell them his joy at the news. He also wanted to help them with some of their difficulties. The letter he wrote from Corinth is our 1 Thessalonians. His thanksgiving for their faith is in chapter 1.

Paul has to answer some attacks which had been made against him, and he does this in chapter 2 by urging the Thessalonians to remember the way in which he served them. Then he deals with one of the subjects that has been worrying the Church; that is the second coming of Jesus. It seems as though the Church thought that those people who were alive on earth at the time of the second coming would have an advantage over those who were already dead. Paul says that those who are alive have no advantage (4, 15), for all men of true faith will see the Lord. Paul states that the coming of Jesus will be sudden, and therefore unexpected. Therefore Christians must always be alert, like good soldiers who keep watch.

Apparently some of the Thessalonians did not understand this last part of the first letter. They thought that the second coming would happen very quickly, perhaps next week or next month. This led them into practical difficulties. Some of them left their daily work, some were very excited, some left living with their families; they felt that nothing on earth mattered because Jesus would so soon make an end of the world. So Paul writes them a second letter. In it he uses rather difficult language about the second coming (chapter 2). He believes that before Jesus returns there will be a great struggle with evil, and because this has not happened yet, the second coming will not happen at once. In the present time people must go on with their ordinary lives. So in chapter 3 we have the stern command, "If any will not work, let him not eat" (10), for while we are in this world we have to act as faithful stewards of the things we have been

given by God. Notice how the last two verses of the letter are written by Paul in his own handwriting. He usually dictated his letters to a man who acted as a secretary, but often finished as he does here, so that the readers would be able to see that the letter really did come from Paul. (See Galatians 6, 11.)

1 AND 2 TIMOTHY AND TITUS

There are some reasons for thinking that these letters are not by Paul himself. The language is different from that of the other letters. The facts do not seem to fit in with what we know in Acts; for example, we do not know of any visit that Paul made to Macedonia while Timothy was left in Ephesus (1 Tim. 1, 3). We do not read in any other letter of the kind of Church organisation that is written about here. Yet the spirit of the letters does seem very close to Paul, and the Church accepted these letters as his from the early days. Perhaps the truth is that after Paul died one of his friends found some writing of his and used it in a letter that he was himself writing. So that these three letters, which are often called Pastoral Epistles, may be based on Paul's own work, but written down later by another man. We cannot be sure about this.

We know quite a lot about Timothy. He had a Greek father and a Jewish mother, and was converted while Paul was at Lystra (1 Cor. 4, 14-17). Later Paul found that he was so faithful that he asked him to travel as his companion (Acts 16, 1-3). Timothy spent some time at Ephesus (Acts 19, 22), and was with Paul on his last journey to Jerusalem. Later on he joined Paul while he was in prison at Rome (Phil. 1, 1). We do not know so much about Titus. His parents were Gentiles (Gal. 2, 3), and he became a companion of Paul. He worked with Paul in helping the Corinthian Church (2 Cor. 7, 13-15). This letter to Titus speaks of him as the bishop of the churches in the island of Crete.

In all three letters there are chapters about the character needed in the leaders of the local Church. The leaders mentioned are bishops (1 Tim. 3, 1; Titus 1, 7), deacons

(1 Tim. 3, 8), and elders (Titus 1, 5). We do not know just what was the work of these men. It seems clear that the bishop was a very senior man, who probably looked after several local congregations. Deacons and Elders were probably the leaders within each local congregation. In every case the writer knows that character is the most important qualification in each of them. They must be the kind of men who can be respected for their lives, and not just for the office that they hold. If they cannot control their own personal lives, then they are not likely to be able to lead the Church. This concern with character is needed today when we think of choosing pastors or deacons in our Churches. In 2 Timothy 4 the verses which the writer gives us about himself do sound like Paul, especially verse 7. Paul knew how hard the fight and the race were, but like a good athlete, he kept on running to the end. Compare with 1 Cor. 9, 24-27.

PHILEMON

This is the shortest of Paul's letters, and deals with a personal matter. Philemon was one of the leading Christians at Colossae. He had a young slave called Onesimus. This slave ran away from the house with some of his master's money. He wandered through some of the cities of Greece, and finally arrived in Rome. There he met Paul. He may have seen him before when Paul was preaching in Asia, but we are not sure about that. However, in Rome Onesimus really became a Christian and a close companion of Paul. Paul knows that the right thing is for this slave to go back to his master and ask for forgiveness. Paul does not send him back alone, but with Tychicus (Col. 4, 7-9) to support his request for forgiveness. Paul writes in this letter to Philemon, asking for the slave to be taken back again, and promising that he will repay any money that is owing (19). It is a very courteous letter, for we can imagine that Paul would have liked to keep Onesimus in Rome.

We notice here that Paul does not condemn slavery in itself. Today we feel that to own another man as a slave

is itself a very un-Christian thing. But Paul is more concerned with the spirit of individual people rather than with slavery as a whole. He longs to see these two men, master and slave, brought together in the spirit of Jesus. If that can happen, then the Kingdom of God will grow in spite of the differences between them.

Chapter 12

Other Letters

THE LETTER TO THE HEBREWS

The Christian Church grew out of the Jewish faith. It was the Jews who had been chosen long ago by God, and who had heard the Word of God through the Law and the Prophets. Jesus was a Jew and spoke to the Jews. The first Christians were Jews. Very quickly, as the Church grew, the Gentiles in it became the majority, and by the end of the first century the Jewish Christians were only a very small group. But three of the New Testament books came from them: Matthew, Hebrews and Revelation. Although Hebrews was not written in Palestine, it is Jewish in thought, and clearly was written to Jewish Christians. We do not know the name of the author. Although some of the early Christians gave it the name of Paul, the Church quickly came to see how different it is from all of Paul's letters. The language and the thoughts are not like Paul's. Early in the third century Origen wrote, "As to who wrote this epistle, God alone knows the truth." Many guesses have been made—Barnabas, Apollos, Silas—but we just do not know the answer. The only help in the letter itself is that the writer knew Timothy, and was living with Christians from Italy (13, 23-24).

At the beginning of the letter the writer sets forth Jesus Christ in his true place. There is a long line of revelation from the days of the forefathers, but the Son by whom God created the world is the great revelation of the Father. In chapters 3 and 4 the writer compares Jesus with Moses and Joshua. They were honoured as founders of the Jewish nation, but their work was not complete. They were not able to lead God's people into the full inheritance of the children of God. Then at the

end of chapter 4 the writer starts comparing Jesus with the high priest. This is one of the main subjects of the letter. Apart from 5, 11, to 6, 12, which is a comment on how to receive difficult teaching, this subject of the priesthood of Christ goes on from 4, 14 to 10, 25. The Jewish high priest was a mediator; that is, he stood between God and men. But he was not perfect; he was a human sinner. The sacrifice he offered was an outward thing; animals were killed and the blood sprinkled, but this did not always touch people's hearts. Jesus is the great high priest because he really does stand between men and God, and his sacrifice on the cross is perfect; it is his own perfect sinless life.

The writer often mentions Melchizedek. He is given as an example of a priest who was also a king, and who did not belong to the line of Levites; nothing is known of his family. This man blessed Abraham (7, 6). Jesus is such a priest. He did not belong to the priestly family of the temple in Jerusalem, but was given his title by God Himself. It is because we have such a high priest who is really touched by our human feelings yet has no sin at all, that we can enter into the holy place (10, 19).

In chapter 11 the writer gives his great honour roll of the heroes of faith, and thinks of them all looking on at the race we are running today. He speaks then about the training that we need in order to run faithfully. There is a discipline that God uses for his children (12, 3-11). The writer ends with some instructions about the Christian life, and closes with a beautiful blessing in 13, 20-21. This letter is in parts difficult to read, just because it is so Jewish in its thought. But it has great value for us today. It helps us to see the work of Jesus in relation to the Old Testament. It gives us one interpretation of the cross of Jesus which makes clear how costly the cross was. It was indeed a sacrifice.

THE LETTER OF JAMES

Sometimes this short letter has been condemned because it does not say much about Jesus. It is certainly

quite like many Jewish books of wisdom. For this reason it was not easily accepted into the New Testament. But we should be thankful for it, for it speaks so plainly and simply about the life of a Christian. The writer may be James, the brother of Jesus (Galatians 1, 19), the eldest of the group of Mary's younger children named in Mark 6, 3. He was the leader of the Church in Jerusalem (Acts 15, 13 and 21, 18), probably because the apostles had left the city. But if it was this James who wrote it, then it is hard to see why it was not quickly accepted by the Church into the New Testament. We do not know definitely what is the answer. Most people think of James as being the brother of Jesus.

The central message of the letter in chapters 1 and 2 is that action is necessary as well as belief. It is no use just saying "I believe in Jesus" if our lives do not show Christian action. Faith and action must go together. Paul says that it is faith that saves us, not our deeds. Is there then a quarrel between Paul and James? No, for when Paul speaks of faith, he sees it as a trusting in God with all our heart and mind and strength, not just a simple saying "I believe". Paul never thought that such faith could exist without action. All his letters show that the faith he preaches has to be worked out in every-day life. James puts the point in a different way. He says that unless there is Christian action then there is no faith, and we are not saved. This is a valuable teaching for us, for we know how easy it is for members of the Church to have the name of being Christians without revealing Christ in their daily lives.

In the other chapters of the letter James shows the kind of life that is necessary to show forth the spirit of Jesus and the royal law of love. Notice the very clear language. James, like Jesus, warns against having a double mind, trying to serve two masters. Such a man is faithful to neither of his masters. If we are to serve God, then it needs our whole mind and heart. He warns about the language we speak (3, 6-12), for even small words can do a lot of harm. We need this reminder that our faith is shown in the kind of language we use to each other.

1 AND 2 PETER

Peter may have been nearing the end of his life when he wrote these letters. Some people doubt whether he wrote them himself, but it seems reasonable to believe that his words are behind them. It was a time when the Church was facing its first real test of persecution (about 65 A.D.), and the leaders were seeking ways of strengthening the faith of the disciples. The first letter is a strong statement of Christian faith. It declares the Gospel story; the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and the work of the Holy Spirit are all mentioned. From that basis of what happened Peter goes on to call for the result of it in the Church. The key passage on the Church is 2, 9 and 10. Here Peter looks at the titles of the Old Testament, the old Israel, and applies them to the Church of Jesus. Every member of the Church receives these titles, for the temple of God consists of all the members.

Peter tries to prepare the hearts of the Christians for the danger of persecution which he knows is coming. There is a blessing if we suffer for the sake of Jesus (3, 14) for he himself showed that suffering may bring men to God (3, 18). If the Church can receive its times of persecution as a share in Christ's suffering, then this is the way to salvation (4, 12 and 13). But in order to face this trial in the right way, Christian people must learn to be humble. It is easy to fight our battles in a spirit of pride; to boast of the wounds we receive. Peter teaches humility (5, 6) because he had himself learnt how easily a man slips away from his loyalty to Jesus and has nothing at all to be proud of.

The second letter does not speak so clearly to us today, for it does not seem to be based so solidly on the Gospel story. It is an answer to people who claim that they have superior knowledge. There were many such people living in the early days of the Church, who thought that there were different standards of knowledge, and that only the most advanced people would be blessed by God. This letter speaks about the knowledge of Jesus Christ (1, 8),

which is offered to all believers. It is as we know Christ that we can escape from the wicked influence of the world (2, 20). It is suggested that part of 2 Peter is borrowed from Jude, verses 4 to 18. If this is so, then probably 2 Peter was not written by the Apostle himself, but by one of his followers about 120 A.D.

JUDE

This short letter was written at a time when the Church was in danger, not from the Roman Empire, but from people inside who were twisting the Gospel. There were men who said that God had given free forgiveness to men, and that the Law no longer had power, and therefore the Christian man was free to do any kind of evil. These are the people mentioned in verse 4. Clearly they could ruin the Church by lowering its standards of behaviour. Verses 5 to 23 are the writer's answer to these men. For bad behaviour there has always been punishment; the Old Testament is full of examples of this. The forgiveness that we find through Jesus does not mean that we can now do evil without paying any penalty. Just because we know the truth and the light of Jesus we shall be expected to reach a higher standard than before. It is possible that the writer of this letter was Jude, a brother of Jesus (Mark 6, 3).

Chapter 13

The Revelation to Saint John

At the beginning of the Bible is the Book of Genesis, and in it we read of the fall of man. God's work is perfect, but man's sin defeats the purpose of God. At the end of the Bible is the book of victory, which sees God's plan for salvation come to its conclusion. Revelation is a book of praise to the victorious Christ, declaring the power of his Kingdom and the righteousness of his judgement. It is not an easy book to understand because, like Daniel, it belongs to the kind of Jewish writing called Apocalyptic. The Church was facing persecution, and the writer offers to the Church the message of hope that has come to him. The hope is in the power of God to cleanse and renew the Church itself and to defeat its enemies. He writes down this message in a series of visions, often with strange language. He writes of beasts, dragons and horses, eagles and stars, strange women and strange buildings. We should not worry too much about the exact meaning of these things. It is more important to understand the purpose of the book as a whole, and there are parts of it which we all can understand and value.

John first reveals the word of God to the Churches that he knew in Asia (chapters 1 to 3). The messages that are given have words of praise for the good things in the life of the Church, words of criticism for their weakness, and words of encouragement about the great prize that will be given to the faithful ones. Though these messages are given to places far away from us, yet many of the verses also apply to us today. There are churches today like Ephesus which have lost their first great enthusiasm for the Gospel; churches like Sardis that have a name for being alive but are really dead; churches like Lao-

dicea, which are proud of their wealth but have no room for Jesus.

In the following chapters are visions of heaven. There are visions of the Lamb and the roll with its seven seals (4, 1 to 8, 1), of the seven angels with the trumpets (8, 2 to 11, 19), of the Church being persecuted by Satan and the beast (12, 1 to 14, 20), of the seven bowls of God's anger (15, 1 to 16, 21), of the judgement of Babylon (17, 1 to 19, 10), and lastly of the final victory and the kingdom of God (19, 11 to 22, 5). We can see that the vision that came to John was one of final victory for the right. There are certainly hard times ahead for the Church, but if she remains faithful then the future is glorious. The great vision of the new Jerusalem which ends the book shows that God will establish His Kingdom for the whole world. In the Kingdom the light of God shines always; it is never dark. In the Kingdom there is no temple as there was in the old Jerusalem, for God is there Himself. From the Kingdom flows the river of the water of life, which is for the healing of the nations. This vision should be ours. We should be looking for that new Jerusalem, as John was.

Some people try to find in this book many hidden messages. They look for the date of the second coming of Jesus and the end of the world. This is not the right way to read Revelation. John was writing for the Church of his own day. He was describing things which "must soon take place" (1, 1). He was not looking into the distant future, but was encouraging his Christian friends in the day of their danger. He speaks of the enemies of God, and they were the Roman authorities of his day. We may see enemies of God in the world today, but we ought not to say that John refers to them. God revealed to him the certainty of victory. We should take this message to our hearts as the most valuable lesson of Revelation. We do not know if the John who wrote this book was the Apostle. The early Church thought it was the same man. Although we cannot be certain about this, yet this John who was sent away to the little island of Patmos certainly was an inspired disciple of Jesus.

Chapter 14

Many Books But one Book

We have seen what a great many different books there are in the Bible. We have seen how they were written over a long period of time. There are books that are gentle and loving; there are books that are hard and stern. There are books of visions and dreams; there are books of history. Yet they all come into our one Bible. The Bible is one book with one message. It is a message about God and about ourselves. It declares God's purpose for us from the beginning of time, and the way in which He has revealed this purpose. It shows His care for the world which He created.

The Bible is one book because it deals with the people of God. From the time of Abraham to the time of the Apostles God works through people whom He has chosen. At first it was the Hebrew people in their wanderings. Later it was just one tribe of them, Judah. Later it was only a remnant of this tribe that was faithful. Out of it came Jesus Christ. In him God entered the world to declare His love. From Jesus the message goes out to the apostles, and then to the whole world. The chosen people is now the Church of Jesus. God is still working through His people. The Bible story which seems to us to have happened a long time ago is continued still in the story of the Church.

The Bible is one book because it speaks of one God. Although the people of the Old Testament often thought of God in very simple ways, yet it is God who spoke to them. The Bible shows that God who came to earth in Jesus also spoke through the prophets and led the children of Israel to the promised land. The God of Jesus Christ is the God of Abraham and Jacob and Amos

and Isaiah. God is always the same. When we pray to God we pray to a God whom we know, because the Bible reveals Him to us.

The Bible is one book because it shows the unchanging purpose of God, which is to save men from sin and bring them back to His Kingdom. This purpose of God does not change. What God was trying to do for the Jews on Sinai, He also does for all men on the cross. He was calling men to forsake the pride which controls their hearts and to worship Him alone. As we read the Bible we should see what it teaches us of this great saving purpose of God; we should see whether we have received that purpose for ourselves; we should seek to take our part in carrying out that purpose to the ends of the earth.



OUTLINE TIME CHART OF THE BIBLE

| Date | Jewish History | Writings | Chief foreign Power |
|-----------|-------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------|
| B.C. 1300 | | Genesis | Egypt |
| 1200 | Exodus | Exodus | |
| | Entry into Canaan | Numbers | |
| 1100 | Joshua | Joshua | |
| | The Judges | Judges | |
| 1000 | Saul | Samuel | |
| | David | | |
| 900 | Solomon | | |
| | Division of the Kingdom | | |
| | Israel Judah | | |
| 800 | Elijah | Kings | Assyria |
| | | Amos | |
| | | Hosea | |
| 700 | Fall of Israel | Isaiah | |
| | | Micah | |
| | | | |
| 600 | Josiah | Deuteronomy Zephaniah | Babylon |
| | | Habakkuk Jeremiah | |
| | | | |
| 500 | Fall of Judah | Ezekiel | Persia |
| | Exile in Babylon | 2nd Isaiah | |
| | | Haggai | |
| 400 | Return of Nehemiah | Malachi | |
| | | 3rd Isaiah | |
| | | Joel | |
| 300 | | Job | Greece |
| | | Ezra-Nehemiah | |
| | | Leviticus | |
| | | Chronicles | |
| 200 | | Jonah | |
| | | Proverbs | |
| 100 | Revolt of Maccabees | Daniel | |
| | | | |
| | Roman Conquest | | Rome |
| | King Herod | | |
| | Life of Jesus | Epistles | |
| A.D. 100 | | Mark | |
| | | Matthew John Luke-Acts | |



LOTU PASIFIKA PRODUCTIONS,
P.O. BOX 208, SUVA, FIJI.
PHONE : 24314, CABLE : LOTUPAK.
HEAD OFFICE : 8 THURSTON STREET, SUVA.